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DISCIPLINE AND MORALE OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY TROOPS
IN THE DIVISION OF THE MISSOURI, 1866 - 1876

by

NEIL BAIRD THOMPSON

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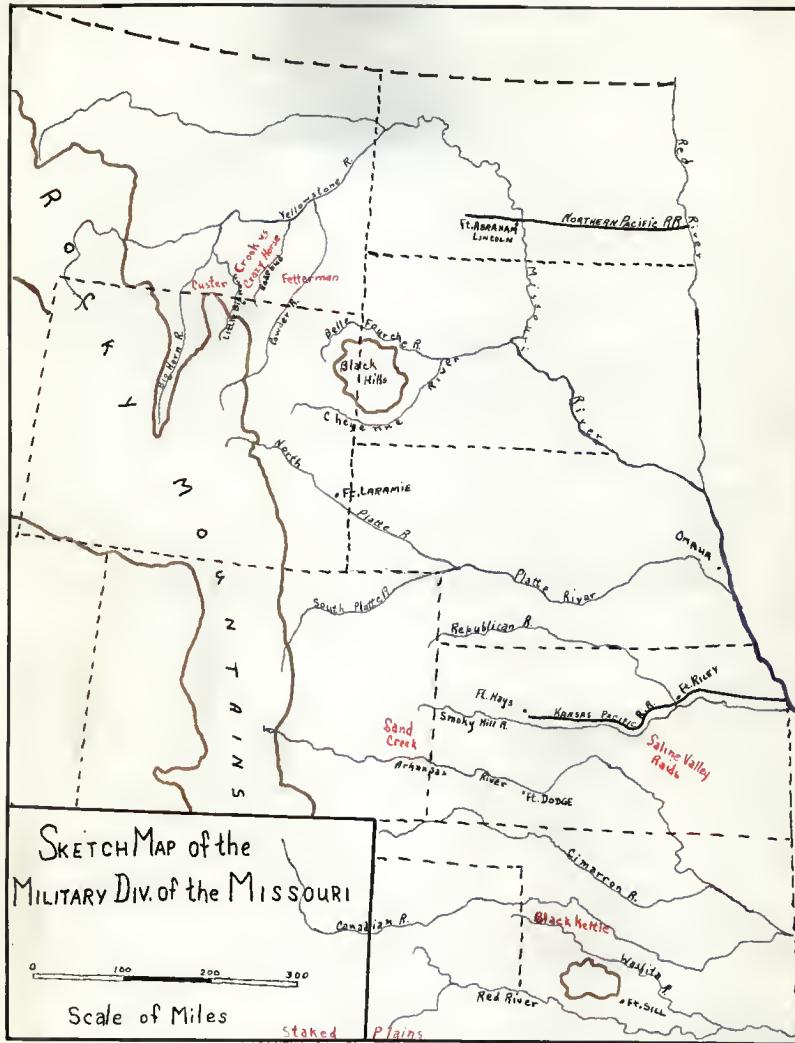


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PREFACE

There is a popular opinion propagated by Hollywood movie makers and pulp-magazine writers that the Army that fought the Indians in the West after the War Between the States was, if the hero was an officer, a glorious assemblage of giants eligible for Valhalla. Or, if the hero was a cowboy, the Army was a bunch of children who could barely feed themselves. The historical inaccuracy of these artistic efforts is quite obvious. But one of these stories, despite its misconception of the truth, contained a phrase that caught the present author's eye -- "the police power of a nation riding in forty saddle boots." This bit of poetry had little meaning to the outcome of the tale, but the rhythm of it kept repeating itself until it finally ripened into a desire to discover just what this Army was like, what it did, and how it lived.

There was no interest in the moral problems in the situation in the writer's idle wonderings. The controversy over the treatment of the Indian has its historical importance even as do the speculations concerning the various military catastrophes of the Indian wars.

But above these moral problems there lay a memory of historical events that was composed of the daily living of the characters in the human story. These things had their historical importance too, and the historian must take the records and mentally recreate those events and attempt to pursue the thinking of the men who faced the daily problems and provided

some solution to them. These were the things that attracted attention and determined the course of this study.

The question may be asked, What may be gained from such a study? Beyond personal satisfaction and the simple process of recreating from contemporary accounts a word picture of a moment in history, the efficiency of a particular armed force can be evaluated, its weaknesses can be elaborated, its strength can be defined. One can measure these things by a study of an army's success in battle and its winning or losing of its wars. These are the contributions of this study to that body of knowledge called history.

The maturation of this desire to investigate the armed force of the U. S. that fought the Plains Indians led to the scanty supply of secondary material, much of it lacking in scholarship, that has become a part of our literary heritage. When it was found that this aspect of the story had not been the subject of any research the author proceeded to the enormous collection of reminiscences and memoirs that were smothering in dust and their own bad grammar on the library shelves. Most of the facts contained in this study were gleaned from these latter sources, despite their obvious personal bias. When many of these facts proved unverifiable by official documents, the author was forced to depend on his personal experience in the armed service and accept or reject the information by analogous reasoning; a process that was defended by the necessity for verification of some sort and, more logically, by the accuracy

of such reasoning instances that could be verified by official records. When the Secretary of War Reports and government documents were reached, their dry language had come alive with humor, pathos, and heroism. Then came a fascinating discovery of virgin material in the form of letters which had been written and forgotten and were reposing in the library at Fort Riley, Kansas. More source material was found in the Kansas Historical Association Library archives in a microfilm of a series of orders issued at Fort Hays, Kansas.

As the saturation point was reached, a conviction began to grow that this Army was as distinctive in character as the Army that fought World War II. Its development, both psychologically and physically, was slow, but steady, from a motley aggregation into what is perhaps the only class of professional fighting men ever developed in the United States.

In reducing the conglomeration of facts to show this development, those general factors -- the problem, the terrain, the enemy, the living conditions, the men, and the officers -- were treated in a general fashion to set the stage for the chronological development that followed. Campaigns and battles were treated only enough to substantiate the conclusion of consistent improvement in the efficiency of the Indian-fighting Army that was demonstrated in the general development of isolated problems. The battles were considered for this reason alone. Yet this reason is sufficient for the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and success in battle is the purpose of any armed force.

Here then, is a romantic story, a decade of the history of the deeds and way of living of a few men. There are a few side issues that present themselves in the text, but the fascinating tale of the Army's share in the conquest of the West reveals itself in all its dirt and beauty, vermin and glory, and cowardice and bravery.

The author wishes to express his indebtedness to the soldiers of the United States Army whose unromantic duty it is to care for the library of the Army General School at Fort Riley, Kansas. In that old limestone building with its funny cupola and clock tower (a relic of the old days of Fort Riley), these modern counterparts of the heroes of this story took a paternal interest in a fumbling amateur research worker and dug out more dust-covered material than he could have dreamed of finding. The writer is also deeply indebted to Dr. Verne S. Sweedlun of the Department of History and Government whose experienced hand can be seen steadyng every aspect of this study -- in the direction of effort, the clarification of a stumbling prose style, and the organization of a bewildering mass of material.

CHAPTER I

THE MILITARY PROBLEM OF THE PLAINS

With a frontier constantly extending and encroaching upon the hunting-grounds of the Indian, hostilities, opposition at least, frequently occurs.¹
General U. S. Grant, General of the Army.

The United States has had a unique element of continuity in the history of its westward expansion and the leavening factor of the frontier community. These factors were planted with the first English settlement in the New World. The idea of Manifest Destiny, the political slogan of the presidential election of 1844, became a part of the cultural complex of the American people at the inception of their cultural integrity. The desire for fur, for gold, and for land created the population movement that ebbed and flowed over three centuries from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific Ocean and that movement slowly spread the culture of Europe over the span of the continent. The last area that this movement occupied was that central portion known as the Great Plains and the Mountain Region that bordered it.

Within that region lived a race of primitive fighting men that had to be removed from the path of the advancing civilization. The story of that removal was a story of naked force. Both sides engaged in a brutal conflict that, in its totality, had no redeeming virtues. The war was nothing more than the

¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1866, 10.

collision of two incompatible cultures; the one struggling to maintain its existence, the other fighting to expand its boundaries to its self-determined limits. Retrospect reveals many moral issues in the situation, but to the homesteader in Kansas or the rancher in Wyoming there were no such issues. There was only the fear of an attack by an unreasoning hate-filled Indian who was incapable of realizing the potential value of the land he had held for centuries and he must therefore be removed.

These homesteaders and ranchmen, as citizens of the United States, had an instrument available to them to effect this desired end. That instrument was the United States Army. It had not been necessary to employ the full strength of the army at this task until after the War Between the States. Prior to that national crisis the frontier had expanded in other directions. The post-war period, however, saw the tide of settlement begin to move into the area of the Great Plains. The building of railroads, the discovery of precious metals in the mountain regions fringing the area, and the prospect of free land through the homestead act attracted men to this last frontier. These citizens demanded the protection of the armed might of the United States and their demands were acknowledged by the transfer of a major portion of the army into the region.

The military force of the United States was at one of its highest peaks of efficiency. The high command, boasting such names as Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan, worked in perfect harmony and understanding. The regimental officers were men with combat experience; many of them had held general officer's com-

missions in the war. The equipment in the hands of this army had been good enough to win one of the hardest fought wars in modern history. The harassed citizens of the border naively imagined that this gigantic military machine could be turned loose on these few primitive savages and the difficulty would be settled in a brisk and efficient manner.

The task was much more difficult than had been anticipated. It dragged through 25 years of constant war before the obvious outcome was reached. The Army slowly realized that it had been assigned an enormous problem in military science that would require many changes in its methods before this duty could be accomplished.

This particular aspect of the history of the United States Army revealed the influence of both human and nonhuman forces. The strategic problem posed by the conquest of the Indians of the Western United States possessed difficulties in the geography of the region, in the material and men available for the use of commanders, the quality of the officer corps, the administrative difficulties created by a decentralized administration, the funds available, and the ability of the enemy to wage war.

The irresponsible continental climate of the West ranged from deadly cold to enervating heat. Such a variation demanded clothing and equipment that was adaptable to the climatic extremes of the region before a military force could operate with any degree of efficiency.

Even more difficult to solve was the problem of space. Tremendous distances made the tactical objectives of speed in

closing with the enemy and sufficient stamina to carry home the assault were major problems for the field commander. The same distances magnified the problem of troop movements and logistics in a geometrical progression. Logistics, the provision of means of transportation for rations, clothing, forage, and ammunition, depended upon wagon trains and pack mules, and these traditional modes of military transport were insufficient to cope with the vast reaches of the Great American Desert.

The same nonhuman element, space, had an insidious effect upon the morale of the men who garrisoned the posts of the West. Isolated from any comforts of home, exhausted by endless marching or bored by months of idleness, and constantly threatened by a seemingly invisible enemy, the private soldier and the officer came to view the empty void as an ogre and an enemy as dangerous as the red man.

The fact that this was not an army of veterans made this factor all the more potent. True, many of the men had seen service in the War Between the States, but the mark of veteran soldiery came not from mere service. This Army was composed of men who enlisted for personal reasons and it lacked the unity and cohesive spirit found in a volunteer army mobilized for a cause. The fundamental esprit de corps was notably lacking in the Regular Army during the early years of this decade.

The officers, too, did not help the situation. Most of them had seen service but they, like the enlisted men, lacked any incentive to improve their professional skill. Few, if any, of the field officers or enlisted men realized the seriousness

of these border troubles with the Indians. Too many of them were not disposed to learn their duties in the Army of the West.

The situation in the Indian country demanded that every man do the work of three men. Never in the history of the Plains Indian Wars did military commanders have enough troops available to assure the success of their planned operations. But the nature of the Army accepted no excuses and the problem was perforce attacked with the available forces.

This was the problem handed to the United States Regular Army in 1866. For the next 10 years this military force would wrestle with innumerable disaffections. Their roots lay in the efficiency of its officer corps, the quality of its armament, the quality of its rations, the conditions of health and sanitation, poorly-adapted clothing, makeshift quarters, and the other elements so important in the discipline and morale of armies. These purely domestic military aspects, the family troubles, would be solved in that decade. By 1876 the Army of the West would be an Indian-fighting Army, trained and equipped to meet the problems of the irregular warfare of the Plains.

In 1865, the military leaders of the nation were just beginning to make their initial estimate of the situation. Their investigation of the vague information of the geography and the capabilities of the various hostile Indian tribes revealed two problems in military science. These problems, they decided, could be isolated from each other by super-imposing a geographical delineation on the region, whereby geographical and tactical unity could be achieved and command responsibility could be assigned.

Thus the Military Division of the Missouri was created to contain the horseman tribes of the Plains region as one problem and the Military Division of the Pacific was to include the problem of the desert tribes of Apaches. Which of the two was the more difficult to solve is hard to determine. But in 1866 the immediate situation demanded action in the Military Division of the Missouri. In this military division the Southern Cheyennes, the Kiowas, the Arapahoes, and the Comanches were striking savagely into the new settlements of farmers in central Kansas. To the north, the Sioux Nation successfully challenged the might of the United States Army in a war for the possession of the Powder River Valley and the closing of the Bozeman Trail, a supply line of the Oregon Territory.

This was only the beginning. The Military Division of the Missouri, which today roughly embraces the two tiers of states from Oklahoma to North Dakota and Montana to northern New Mexico, was to suffer from a series of savage outbreaks and more or less continuous depredations. The war of attrition against the farmers of Kansas and Nebraska and the freighters from Oregon lasted for more than two years. In the southern department, the Department of the Missouri, the red man was defeated. In the north, in the Department of the Platte and the Department of the Dakotas, the organizing genius of Red Cloud led the Sioux warriors to victory and gave the Army its most humiliating defeat. Then, under the administration of the Peace Policy, the opportunistic hostile carried on an exasperating game of guerrilla warfare and intimidation of government agents.

Another flaming war rocked the area in 1873. The first outbreak was in the North where it was directed largely against the building of the Northern Pacific railroad. Then the warriors in the South made another valiant attempt to throw back the invading plows of the farmers, an attempt that resulted in the final smashing of the Southern Tribes. Near the end of the decade there came a violent outbreak in the North against the invasion of the Black Hills by miners that rivalled the jihad of Islam. Through it all the police power of a nation rode on the carbines dangling from the pommels of a few saddles.

Perhaps it is safe to say that the series of events that filled this decade of the Army's history began at Sand Creek in Colorado Territory near Fort Lyon on November 27, 1864, when Colonel J. M. Chivington, an ex-Methodist minister, and his First Colorado Cavalry regiment of volunteers committed what "is perhaps the foulest and most unjustifiable crime in the annals of America."² The First Colorado sought and found Indians, any Indians,³ on which to wreak its exasperation at a futile chase after hostile raiders. On that morning a group of American citizens, temporarily in the uniform of the United States Army, murdered a band of friendly Cheyenne Indians who slept under an American flag. And the recipients of this beast-

² Nelson A. Miles, Personal Recollections, (New York, 1896), 139.

³ Stanley Vestal, Warpath and Council Fire, (New York, c. 1948), 68.

ly assault never forgot that blood bath. Indeed, the embers of the council fires of all the Plains Tribes breathed a fiery warning to the grave elders, wherever they met in council, to hold the white man in suspect. In one blow the Indian troubles were magnified to gigantic proportions. There was no hope of ever reaching an understanding settlement between the white man and the red man; only war to the knife remained after Sand Creek.

CHAPTER II

THE ENEMY

The son of nature view is equally erroneous with that which regards the Indian as a creature possessing the human form but divested of all other attributes of humanity, and whose traits of character, habits, modes of life, disposition, and savage customs disqualify him from the exercise of all rights and privileges, even those pertaining to life itself.¹ Brevet Major-General G. A. Custer, Commanding 7th United States Cavalry.

One of the most important steps in a military commander's estimate of the situation is to consider the strength, prowess, and morale of his enemy. The military commanders of the Plains departments were veterans of one of the bloodiest wars the world had ever seen and, complacent in their experience, they turned naively to the Indian problem and failed, initially, to observe this cardinal principle of military leadership. They failed to appreciate a fundamental difference between themselves and their enemy in the approach to the problem of war. To the veteran of four years of mass slaughter, war was a science, a mathematical procedure whose determining factors were surprise, shock action, and fire power, each of which contributed to the cardinal objective, to fix and destroy the enemy. Maneuver was the variable factor in the game and the terrain was the controlling factor of maneuver.

To the Indian, however, war was an art rather than a science. The possession and application of symbolic ritual

¹ George Armstrong Custer, Wild Life on the Plains, (St. Louis, c. 1891), 22.

in dance ceremonies, the feathered headdress, the painting of the face and body contributed to success and failure, as much as factors of terrain and fire power, by their psychological impact upon the participants, both those blessed by the ceremony and those cursed by it. The accumulation of deeds of individual daring, whether they were tactically important or not, were as important as winning a pitched battle to the Indian, and they went far in determining his social and political status in the group. Maneuver was to be used to avoid battle as much as to gain desirable terrain from which to fight. Position meant little or nothing to the Indian just as ownership of land was an incomprehensible concept. Because of this it was nearly impossible to force him to fight at a disadvantage.²

In the Indian tribes of the Plains there was a nearly perfect adaptation of a neolithic culture to its environment. Francis Parkman³ gave to posterity an intimate picture of that way of life. The organization into small tribal units, the dwelling place, the accumulation of vast herds of horses, the loosely defined tribal areas are all examples of an environmental adaptation that was best suited to the capabilities of their crude stone-age culture. In their trade with the white man they were offered and they accepted those elements of an advanced culture that best fitted into their traditional way of life. Out of their hunter economy, their small numbers,

² Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:36.

³ Francis Parkman, The Oregon Trail, (Boston, 1927).

and the vast theater of operations, they developed a method of warfare that fitted the situation admirably. Until almost ten years of constant fighting with the white men taught them the value of numbers, the Indians equipped themselves with an excellent moving remount and operated in small parties that could move quietly and rapidly over vast stretches of territory without worrying too much about securing adequate amounts of grass and water.⁴ He learned to carry cooked rations and to depend on game to fill in the menu if necessary.⁵ Frequent tribal warfare coupled with constant hunting taught him the use of smoke screens and dust clouds and all the elements of deception⁶ and the finer points of camouflage and concealment. That the necessity of courage and fortitude was well known and appreciated is evidenced by the religious significance that was attached to the sun dance and other ascetic practices. Individually the Indian was a fighting machine trained in the crucible of experience and possessed with amazing skill in warfare.

The political and social organization of the tribes demonstrated the basic individualism of the red man and the tenuous control of the group over the individual. Such was the power of social mores that no chief or council could hope to hold any young man who had decided upon a scalping party. Entrance to the council and warrior societies depended upon success in

⁴ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:84.

⁵ Joe De Barthe, The Life and Adventures of Frank Grouard, (St. Joseph, Mo., c. 1894), 169-70.

⁶ Senate, Document No. 68, 73 Cong., 1 Sess., 1933.

the field and the young man would choose the warpath alone rather than suffer his personal ambition to be stifled.⁷

Such police control as there was within the group was found in the warrior societies.⁸ These secret fraternities were composed of the able-bodied fighting men who had demonstrated their capabilities as warriors. Within the organization there was a rude form of democracy in the formulation of plans. But to the other members of the tribal group they offered little or no choice of alternative plans.⁹ From these small groups and their elected leaders came the discipline that welded the warriors into an effective mass. Out of these two rudimentary political groups came the great leaders of the red men,¹⁰ men whose names are synonymous in legend with war and valor, names such as Red Cloud, Crazy Horse, Gall, Stone Calf, Satank, and Sitting Bull. In these, and others like them, the red men discovered sources of leadership and organizing ability that, for sheer individual genius, equalled and, perhaps, surpassed the leadership gained from the intricate system of training and selection used by the white man.

A study of the methods of assault and the selection of bodies of troops to attack demonstrate the Indian's realiza-

⁷ Phillippe de Trobriand, Army Life in Dakota, (Chicago, 1941), 266-7; Maurice Greer Smith, "Political Organization of the Plains Indians," University Studies of the University of Nebraska, 24:73, 1925. This is an excellent discussion of the council, its organization and powers.

⁸ Vestal, op. cit., 158.

⁹ De Barthe, op. cit., 158.

¹⁰ Smith, op. cit., 12, 73.

tion of the capabilities of his weapons and equipment. Since he was usually mounted when joining battle, the Indian of the Plains evolved the tactics of circling which gave him the greatest advantage of his horse and the best opportunity to close with the enemy without injury to himself. As a result he greatly feared and frequently avoided the "walk-a-heaps," the infantry foot soldier, who did not run but formed squares and fought where he stood with a long-range rifle and a bayonet reserved to meet the final mounted assault.¹¹

This greatest of all horsemen realized man's dependency on the horse in traversing the tremendous distances of the Plains, and he fought with that realization uppermost in his mind. Stampeding grazing horses, killing horse holders in the initial stages of battle or killing the horses if necessary, and stealing horses from the picket lines of army camps were primary tactical objectives to the red man. When attacked by mounted troops, the warrior shot to kill horses. If he found himself outnumbered in the field, he would try to entice pursuit with the object of exhausting the enemy's horses.¹² He knew that the Great American Desert defied the infantryman when he opposed mounted hostiles. Cavalry troops were worse than afoot when they lost their mounts, because the nature of their service rendered them unaccustomed to foot marching, their equipment was designed for mounted service, and their

¹¹ Clark Wissler, Indians of the United States, (New York, 1940), 263.

¹² John G. Bourke, On the Border with Crook, (London, 1892), 274, 257.

reserves of ammunition were carried in the saddle bags on their mounts. In such a situation the lightly-equipped horseman enjoyed every advantage over dismounted troops for he could retain the initiative at all times and could refuse or join battle when and where it pleased him.

Only in the matter of ammunition supply did the troops enjoy a permanent advantage over the red man.¹³ Lacking the means of production of powder, the Indian spent much of his time in accumulating this expendable material of war as well as the more lasting weapons in which to use it.¹⁴ It is true that most of these arms and ammunition came to him through capture or by illegal purchase as indicated by Byrne.¹⁵ As a result the arms traffic was lucrative business and since there was no means of punishing offenders, except moral suasion which is notably weak where a Yankee dollar is involved, most hostile tribes enjoyed the company of gun-runners and were even able to purchase war material from established merchants in towns.¹⁶ But, in addition to these, some weapons were issued to the Indians by the agents of the Indian Bureau, which, it was quaintly believed, were used in hunting, and these weapons were frequently the latest models, even repeating rifles,¹⁷ in spite of the fact that the Indian pre-

¹³ Wissler, op. cit., 259

¹⁴ G. A. Custer, op. cit., 42.

¹⁵ P. E. Byrne, Soldiers of the Plains, (New York, 1926), 203.

¹⁶ Loring Benson Priest, Uncle Sam's Stepchildren, (New Brunswick, 1942), 156

¹⁷ Wissler, op. cit., 260; Rister, op. cit., 210-1.

ferred and continued to use the bow in his hunting. These facts rankled the hearts of the army officers and led their more literary representatives to emit blasts of sarcasm in print.¹⁸ Official reports from the field as early as 1866 record the armament of Indians as being "revolvers as well as rifles,"¹⁹ and Major Reno spoke with respect and feeling of the excellent range of the weapons and the skill of the Indian marksmen in the use of their firearms at the Little Big Horn on June 26, 1876.²⁰ In addition to the records of Army officers and official documents, there is the concurring testimony of the oft-interviewed Rain-in-the-Face, who, upon being shown a painting of the Custer massacre in 1894 and being asked if it was correct, boastfully told the interviewer, W. Kent Thomas,

This picture gives us bows and arrows. We were better armed than the long swords. Their guns wouldn't shoot but once--the thing wouldn't throw out the empty cartridge shells . . . When we found they could not shoot we saved our bullets by knocking the long swords over with our war clubs--it was just like killing sheep.²¹

However, in evaluating the armament of the Plains Indian, military leaders (and today's writers) frequently overlooked the effectiveness of the indigenous weapon, the bow and arrow. These weapons, uniquely adapted to use on horseback and in the hands of its manufacturer (for the Indian boy used his own ingenuity in making his first artillery and all of the future

18 G. A. Custer, op. cit., 41-2.

19 Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

20 Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1876, 1:33.

21 Cyrus Townsend Brady, Indian Fights and Fighters, (New York, 1909), 285.

improvements he could devise)²² were deadly, fast-shooting devices.²³ The Indian preferred using the bow at a short range to increase its rapidity of fire and its effectiveness, and his traditional tactics in battle, whether mounted or dismounted, were premised on close-in fighting even after he obtained firearms.²⁴ Here was a weapon that the aborigine could and did produce, in fact, spent most of his leisure time at the task, thus equalizing somewhat his deficiency in respect to the assimilated cultural trait, firearms. The striking power of this weapon has been frequently and ably attested by the contemporary accounts of those who faced it in battle.²⁵ Thus, while shortage of powder or a broken part in his firearm might temporarily embarrass the warrior, he was never completely without defense.

Here, then, was a potential enemy whose qualities of strength, skill, and armament were unrecognized and unappreciated by the officers of the United States Army until they had experienced those qualities.²⁶ Physically fit, trained by the life they lived, taught the glories of war, tempted to those glories by ambition, sensitive to tactical procedure, and well, if not plentifully, armed, they went into battle superbly equipped to test the metal of the shop keepers, clerks, farm boys, and bums led by unseeing veterans of a more polite war.

²² Otis Tufton Mason, "North American Bows, Arrows, and Quivers," Smithsonian Institution, Annual Report, 1893, 646.

²³ Mrs. H. B. Carrington, Ab-sa-ra-ka, (Philadelphia, 1868), 187.

²⁴ Mason, op. cit., 647

²⁵ Ibid., 648.

²⁶ Fairfax Downey, Indian-fighting Army, (New York, 141), 44.

CHAPTER III

THE SERVICE

To protect the frontiers from depredating bands of Indians; to assist the Department of the Interior to maintain its authority on the various Indian reservations; to explore and survey unknown territory; to aid the civil authorities in enforcing the laws and maintaining peace in remote districts; to escort national boundary, State and territorial surveying parties; to protect and defend the advanced lines of railway in the far west . . .¹ Lieutenant-General Philip Henry Sheridan, Commanding the Military Division of the Missouri.

The Troops of the Service

The armies of war that have been spawned by the United States have usually been smothered with philosophical and moral virtues that condone the destruction and human misery that they have dispensed. But the Regular Army of 1866 was not an army of war; its uniform was about as awe inspiring to the citizens of the nation as the policeman on the corner of every city, and its purpose and its functions were similar to those of a police officer. This Army was expected to care for itself by building its own quarters, largely from native materials,² to carry its own water, and to cut its own wood and ice.³ When there was spare time its men were detailed to repair cisterns, roofs, and sewage disposal sinks on the established posts.⁴ All of this came under the official label

¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:23.

² Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1866, 17; Kansas City Times, August 7, 1939.

³ James Parker, The Old Army, (Philadelphia, c. 1939), 21.

⁴ Outgoing Letters, 1866-1868, Fort Riley, Kansas, MS in Army General School Library, Letter dated March 18, 1866. Hereinafter cited as Fort Riley, Letters.

of labor of the troops.

This "labor of the troops" was a great thing. It made the poor wretch who enlisted under the vague notion that his admiring country needed his services to quell hostile Indians, suddenly find himself a brevet architect, carrying a hod and doing odd jobs of plastering and kalsomining.⁵

Besides these construction and house-keeping duties, the Army had to protect itself with a system of routine interior guard duty. It was expected to escort the mail to California, to guard inspecting Congressmen, to explore areas where individuals feared to go, to furnish a guard for the capital investments of the nation's empire builders, to rescue settlers who were careless enough to be picked up by wandering war parties, and it was to be omnipresent enough to appear everywhere at one time when hostiles were threatening. As if this were not enough, the Army found it necessary to be its own transport agent. This indispensable duty had not been provided for in the organization tables and it was necessary to detail large numbers of troops as teamsters, herders, and hostlers, often against their will, to haul the Army's supplies across prairie and mountain.⁶ When the occasion demanded and the requisite orders were issued, it was to die cheerfully to teach the red man the authority of the Great White Father.

It was largely a thankless monotonous routine that this Army performed and one that few of its troopers understood as they labored toward their paradoxical objectives of aiding in

⁵ Bourke, op. cit., 7.

⁶ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:6.

the process of civilizing the wild Indians and curbing his murderous theiving tendencies with force of arms.

In the mind of the soldier the real paradox was the method of achieving the above objectives. Like the policeman, his primary duty was to punish crime, a much more difficult task than taking forceful steps to prevent it. But the soldier was hampered by the specter of a court-martial if he should shoot an Indian under any circumstances.⁷ He was under special orders not to fire on an Indian except by orders of a commissioned officer, and that person was to request orders from his commander whenever the situation would permit such action.⁸ While the bewildered and sorely-tried soldier did his best to comply with such orders, the Indians enjoyed the situation to the fullest extent. The red man happily assured the traders that he would not waste ammunition on soldiers, he would "chase soldier and drive away with sticks."⁹

There was another aspect to this problem other than the paradoxes created by the confusion and red tape. There was the problem of man-power; how many men were needed and how they should be employed. Officers in the field were convinced that the cavalry was the only arm of the service that could be used efficiently to run down Indians.¹⁰ The very nature of the terrain required constant mounted patrols of some sort, a duty that was perforce

⁷ De B. Randolph Keim, Sheridan's Troopers on the Border, (Philadelphia, c. 1885), 58.

⁸ Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

⁹ Keim, op. cit., 58.

¹⁰ Trobriand, op. cit., 55; Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:84.

accepted and executed by the cavalry arm. But other arms of the service were needed also. Infantry served as garrison detail for the numerous posts scattered over the country, and troops of some sort were needed to occupy the static defense system that was used along the railroads, a system of dugouts that offered protection to a small number of men and wherein they were able to hold off many times their own number and thus protect the road beds.¹¹ Artillery troops were useful too, for nothing so disconcerted a charge of mounted warriors as bursting howitzer shells.¹²

But what was needed and what was available were two different things. Frontier commanders were constantly requesting additional troops during the decade from the end of the Civil War to the Little Big Horn. Colonel Carrington was sent into the Powder River country in the summer of 1866 to establish a new military district among the Sioux confederation and to build several new posts with only eight companies of Infantry and they were composed largely of recruits. To alleviate the situation as much as possible he armed his regimental band with carbines. Later, in place of the effective reinforcements of Cavalry which he urgently requested, he received scattered detachments of mounted men armed with outmoded weapons, carrying insufficient ammunition, and with no military training.¹³ At Fort Riley, in the same year, the post adjutant, an officer of the Second Cavalry, had to refuse to fur-

¹¹ Keim, op. cit., 61.

¹² Carrington, op. cit., 129.

¹³ Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

nish details of men for urgently needed repairs on the post since there were only 57 men present for duty.¹⁴

General Sherman reported in 1867 that there were only two regiments of Cavalry available for field duty in the Division of the Missouri, a fact that necessitated constant shifting of those regiments over vast areas, movements that could be executed only after the hostiles had made known the shift in their area of operations by some depredation.¹⁵ The fluidity of the situation and the defensive role of the troops were simply more than the available men could handle. General Sheridan, when he took command of the Department of the Missouri in 1867, found his command to consist of 2,600 men (more than half of them Infantry) scattered among 26 posts.¹⁶ In 1872, General Sheridan (then commanding the Division of the Missouri) reported that his command was made up of 22 regiments, two-thirds of these being Infantry, with which he must garrison 72 posts.¹⁷ Captain King of the 5th Cavalry (in 1876) waxed sarcastic over the tardiness of Congress when replacements and fillers for his regiment arrived after the campaign was finished.¹⁸

As for trained artillery-men, that arm of the service was largely occupied in other areas of the nation. Such artillery

¹⁴ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated March 18, 1866.

¹⁵ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1866, 35.

¹⁶ Carl Coke Rister, Border Command, (Norman, 1944), 42-3.

¹⁷ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1872, 1:35.

¹⁸ Charles King, Campaigning with Crook, (New York, 1890), 160.

weapons as were used against hostile Indians were served by troops of other arms who had been trained in the barest rudiments of the art by their officers.¹⁹

This dearth of man-power was not due to lack of foresight on the part of the military leaders but rather to the hasty demobilization of the armed forces after the War Between the States and the resulting necessity of complete reorganization of the Army, and the persistent demands of Congress and the Cabinet for economy and retrenchment in the expenditures of the military service.²⁰ Such economy gave the appeasers and the idealistic humanitarians a free rein by default.

Life in the Service

If the command of the West posed certain paradoxes in an abundance of objectives and a lack of means, the life of the men engaged in that endeavor was not at all inconsistent with itself; it was uniformly hard and unrewarding.

The base of operations for each unit was glamorized by the title of a Post, Camp, or Station with the name of some hero of the late War attached as the denominating factor in the best Anglo-Saxon tradition. Hardly any of these were fortified places but were built on the plan of a cantonment.

¹⁹ Hugh Lenox Scott, Some Memories of a Soldier, (New York, c. 1928), 34.

²⁰ Leroy R. Hafen and Francis Marion Young, Fort Laramie and the Pageant of the West, (Glendale, Calif., 1938), 365.

When the site for a new post had been selected, troops would move to the position and the building operation would be commenced by marking out that sanctified bit of earth called the parade ground.²¹ Around this rectangular area the buildings would be placed, officer's quarters on one side, troop barracks immediately opposite, and the ends would be filled with the buildings necessary to military operations, such as post headquarters, storehouses, hospital, stables, and the guardhouse.²²

Here in this tiny cluster of buildings would live the troops who would one day win the West; frequently there was only a single company, occasionally there would be as many as six or eight companies.²³ Around them would stretch the tossing sea of grass or the curling crests of mountains reaching towards infinity. Within the post the commandant, like a sea captain, was a law unto himself; he ordered the daily life, watched the execution of his commands, and served a rough sort of justice to all those who failed to comply to the rigid rules of military service. Formal courtesy and rigid discipline were a matter of course; the flag, the very heart of the garrison, received daily honors,²⁴ and the post commander sometimes ordered daily dress parades on the hostile grass of the empty prairie.²⁵

²¹ Carrington, op. cit., 106.

²² Elizabeth B. Custer, Boots and Saddles, (New York, 1885), 98-9.

²³ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1866, 17.

²⁴ Keim, op. cit., 59.

²⁵ Fort Hays, Kansas, Special Order Book, October 15, 1866 - May 26, 1868, Microfilm in Kansas Historical Association Library Archives, Post Order No. 8, dated July 1, 1867, Hereinafter cited as Fort Hays, Orders.

The sense of isolation was rendered more complete by the economizing practice of supplying many of the outposts with nonperishable supplies but once a year.²⁶ From the post the patrols and escorts moved out daily, scouting parties returned with detailed reports of Indian movements and sketch maps of the country they had traversed. Occasionally the post was abuzz with activity over an inspection, or the arrival of a supply train, or the departure of troops on a campaign. But normally it drowsed and sweated in the summer sun, and in winter it huddled itself together around rationed fires and waited for spring. Shivered is perhaps a better word than huddled, at least for the occupants, for most of the posts were cheaply built as temporary posts.²⁷

The tar paper roofing would crack in the sun and leak in the rain.²⁸ Where logs were used, those serving as foundations would rot and the entire building would sag until it was hardly fit for men. Some rooms had nothing but thick paper instead of plaster for walls.²⁹ General Sherman lamented loudly that troop barracks on the frontier were "in some places inferior to what horses usually" had in Washington, D. C.³⁰

26 House of Representatives, Executive Document No. 116, 42 Cong., 3 Sess., 1873.

27 Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1871, 1:36.

28 Fort Riley, Letters, Letter dated July 19, 1866.

29 E. B. Custer, Boots and Saddles, 99.

30 Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1869, 1:31.

Enlisted men who were married were even more unfortunate, for their housing was seldom provided due to lack of sufficient appropriations for quarters, and such housing as they had must therefore be constructed of borrowed government material acquired after tattoo had been sounded.³¹ These quarters were frequently as improvised as the jungles of hobo-land, but they served their purpose and officers ignored the means of acquisition of material as an evil nurtured by an unsympathetic Congress.

Officers fared considerably better than the troops in this respect, but even they were not coddled by the public treasury.³² Spartan simplicity was expected of both officers and their ladies on the frontier. Furnishings and decoration for their shelters were personal problems and varied with the ingenuity and the private purse of the individual. The pay was insufficient to meet the cost of professional decorators, had such been available, and the difficulties in transporting such articles as furniture made such a choice a mere matter of rhetoric.

Then there was the ancient and honorable custom of rank that was certain to keep the matter of quarters in complete confusion. The coming of a new officer to the post caused a complete reshuffling of quarters as the rank of the newcomer gave him an inviolable right to remove any officer who

³¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:96, and 1875,

1:5.

³² E. B. Custer, Boots and Saddles, 99.

was his junior in the service. The junior officer's compensation was to remove his junior and so ad infinitum or until the pack had been thoroughly mixed. But in spite of such customs there was actually little choice in the matter. With the exception of the commanding officer's residence, which was usually larger than the others, the quarters were equally bad.

In view of the insufficient quarters and the unpredictable climate of the region it seems strange that the health of the troops should be so uniformly good. But the very occasional remarks of the Surgeon-General's reports³³ and the reports of some department commanders³⁴ indicate that such was the case. The out-door life, rugged and ready as it was, was sufficient tonic for all ailments and the medical officers of the frontier commands were more frequently treating wounds than disease.³⁵

Nevertheless, once the posts were completed, the medical department took every precaution that was familiar to their practice to prevent any epidemic of disease,³⁶ at least as far as circumstances would permit. But the water supply proved a constant problem that was nearly insolvable for the western posts. The practice for many years was to take the post water supply from whatever source was available and to distribute it in barrels in a daily door to door delivery,³⁷ a system that was pregnant with possibilities for epidemic outbreaks.

³³ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1876, 1:318.

³⁴ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1872, 1:43.

³⁵ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1876, 1:318.

³⁶ Fort Hays, Orders, General Order No. 23, dated April 16, 1868.

³⁷ Elizabeth B. Custer, Following the Guidon, (New York, 1890), 230-1.

In view of such difficulties it is not surprising that cholera should sweep through these posts periodically as it did through the posts in western Kansas in the summer of 1867. Fort Harker first suffered this scourge and Mrs. Custer dramatically reported that soldiers died "by platoons."³⁸ The disease spread rapidly and Fort Hays was likewise afflicted. At this post the difficulty in securing proper nursing for the patients has been recorded. The commander made use of volunteers who were serving sentence in the guardhouse as nurses. He later granted them a pardon for their service, if it would be approved by the Department Commander.³⁹

Another and more common scourge that reduced the totals of men present for duty was the age-old military problem of scurvy. The commanders on the frontier sought out and used every measure possible to prevent or cure this disease. On extended campaigns the entire command sought and ate wild onions and wild fruits and berries.⁴⁰ In garrison the appearance of scurvy among the troops made antiscorbutics top priority on transportation lists.⁴¹ Wherever possible, post vegetable

³⁸ Elizabeth B. Custer, Tenting on the Plains, (New York, 1895), 381.

³⁹ Fort Hays, Orders, Post Order No. 15, dated July 22, 1867. The pardon was later rescinded on the order of the Department Commander and the men were returned to the guard house to finish out their sentences in the interest of discipline. Fort Hays, Orders, Special Order No. 93, dated September 10, 1867.

⁴⁰ Martin F. Schmitt (ed.), General Crook, his Autobiography, (Norman, 1946), 210.

⁴¹ Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

gardens were planted and fresh vegetable were issued to the entire garrison.⁴² But in those areas where gardens were impossible, fresh fatty meats were used as an effective substitute. Jerky (meat dried in the sun with little or no salt) was sometimes used as a preventive agent,⁴³ though its effectiveness has not been recorded. Such versatile efforts were not completely successful⁴⁴ but scurvy was held in check sufficiently to prevent wholesale casualties among the troops.

There were other more subtle problems facing the medical officers on the frontier. During long campaigns some men suffered from battle fatigue, an ailment if not a term well recognized by the medical officers of the seventies. Those who could not stand the nervous tension of Indian campaigning were examined by the doctors and were removed from the war zone periodically as transportation was available without detriment to the service.⁴⁵

These difficulties were the exception rather than the rule on the frontier. Continuous inclement weather which caused rheumatism and kindred ills⁴⁶ and bad provisions⁴⁷ or lack of any provisions were probably the most pernicious threats to the health of the men.

⁴² Fort Riley, Letters, Letter dated August 15, 1867.

⁴³ Fort Hays, Orders, Special Order No. 36, dated July 9, 1867.

⁴⁴ Loc. cit.; Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887; E. B. Custer, Tenting, 321-2.

⁴⁵ King, op. cit., 94-5.

⁴⁶ Schmitt, op. cit., 211.

⁴⁷ G. A. Custer, op. cit., 66.

The usual field ration of bacon,hardtack, sugar, and coffee were insufficient in bulk and in calories, proteins, and vitamins, a fact understood though not defined by field commanders.⁴⁸ It was common practice for a command to drive a herd of beef cattle with the supply train to add to the rations in the field. It was just as common for the Indians to attempt to steal the herd, a deed they not infrequently accomplished.⁴⁹ The wagons also carried sacks of beans and flour which were to be used to add bulk to the ration. The beans were invariably baked in a dutch oven and the flour was baked into an unleavened cake, dubbed "dobie bread" by the troops.⁵⁰ These delicacies, however, appeared only while the troops were camped near the wagon trains and, since the reconnaissance scouts were performed by lightly equipped columns, the wagon-train supplements were too infrequent to make

⁴⁸ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1876, 1:93. The Army Ration (Par. 1367, A. R., 1863.) (One ration is enough food for one day for one man; in other words a ration is three meals.) Twelve ounces of pork or bacon or canned beef (fresh or corned,) or one pound and four ounces of fresh beef, or twenty-two ounces of salt beef; eighteen ounces of soft bread or flour, or sixteen ounces of hard bread, or one pound and four ounces of cornmeal; and to have, every one hundred rations, fifteen pounds of pease or beans, or ten pounds of rice or hominy; ten pounds of green coffee, or eight of roasted (or roasted and gound) coffee, or two pounds of tea; fifteen pounds of sugar, four quarts of vinegar; four pounds of soap, four pounds of salt; four ounces of pepper; one pound and eight ounces of adaman-tine or star candles; and to troops in the field, when necessary, four pounds of yeast-powder to one hundred rations of flour. E. B. Custer, Guidon, 205, footnote.

⁴⁹ Bourke, op. cit., 256; Senate, Document No. 68, 73 Cong., 1 Sess., 1933.

⁵⁰ W. G. Wilkinson, Letter printed in Winners of the West, 17:8, February, 1940.

up for dietary deficiencies. Even more debilitating than this dietary deficiency, the economy of Washington, in the early years of the decade, forced the Quartermaster to issue rations that were six or seven years old and had been improperly protected from the elements by lack of proper storehouses. These rancid and moldy rations added materially to the problem of health on the frontier.⁵¹

To the soldier's personal morale the coffee was the most important item in the ration issue, and he, like his modern counterpart in the last war, hoarded his supply carefully and could never start out the day without a steaming black cup full of this stimulant.⁵² In bulk, however,hardtack actually filled more stomachs than any other item. The trooper's ingenuity in devising methods of reducing this cement-like square of flour, salt, and water to an edible condition is amazing in its variety and amusing in its defiance of the rules of cooking.⁵³ Certainly the most unpopular item on the Subsistence Department's shelves were the desiccated vegetables that were sometimes issued in lieu of peas or beans. These lumps of dried vegetable matter were partially identifiable as cabbage, carrots, turnips, parsnips, and onions. The residue was insoluble and insolvable, but it came floating blithely into the stew without invitation.⁵⁴ Of course, game was more or less plentiful and

⁵¹ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 394.

⁵² John D. Billings, Hardtack and Coffee, (Minneapolis, 1888), 121.

⁵³ Ibid., 113-8.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 177.

appeared on the mess fare when the situation permitted, and the Subsistence stores provided some canned goods.⁵⁵ In some areas native fruits and berries were made up into jams and preserves, though married men enjoyed these more than the men living in barrack or bachelor quarters.⁵⁶

Married men also escaped the indigestion that was innocently encouraged in the company kitchens. Company cooks were detailed by roster for ten day periods with no regard for their culinary ability.⁵⁷ In the field the troopers cooked for themselves. Not infrequently their rations were reduced to their worn-out cavalry horses,⁵⁸ or meat and Indian ponies captured from hostiles.⁵⁹ In general, the rations were insufficient, poor in quality, lacking balance, and poorly prepared, but men ate them over countless camp fires and moved on to new duties and more food of the same kind.

Such a monotony of diet, duty, and companionship bore harshly on the nerves, and only the strict discipline preserved the sanity of the men occupying the frontier garrisons by demanding in plain terms the individual control of temper and emotion. Condemned to poor food, worse quarters, exasperating formalities, and more time than they could use profitably, it was no small wonder that troops should engage.

55 Frances M. A. Roe, Army Letters from an Officer's Wife, (New York, 1909), 27-8; Carrington, op. cit., 177.

56 Loc. cit.

57 Senate, Executive Document No. 47, 45 Cong., 2 Sess., 1878.

58 De Barthe, op. cit., 301

59 Schmitt, op. cit., 206.

in wild releases of nervous tension or that they should welcome the hardships of campaigning. But such a general picture is only half the story, for the Army that came to build and garrison these outposts was, in spite of its general similarities, made up of individuals, and they added their personality to the spirit of the Army.

CHAPTER IV

THE MEN

These soldiers are not nearly as nice as one would suppose them to be, when one sees them dressed up in their blue uniforms with bright brass buttons.¹

Mrs. Frances Roe.

Any army has a character that comes to it from its experience in war and peace. Its character is often preserved in ballad and story, but its elements, the men, "enrich the silence where the millions go."² Nevertheless, armies are composed of men who retain some individuality and who add something to the army's personality despite the leavening influence of the discipline and training in the service. This army, the Army of the Indian Wars, was a force filled to the brim with individualism that ran the gamut from good to evil, from nobility to cowardice. Its elements were an incongruous medley of professional soldiers, "Galvanized Yankees" (ex-Confederate soldiers), emigrants, the dregs of the cities, and boys searching for the adventure of a distant romantic place.

From this Army's inception there were professionals on the muster rolls, men to whom the army was home,³ and in every draft of recruits others returned who had found the prosaic business

¹ Roe, op. cit., 5.

² John G. Neihardt, The Song of the Indian Wars, (New York, 1928), 202.

³ Brady, op. cit., 148.

world too dull after the excitement of war.⁴ There were Southerners, too, men who had been economically and spiritually ruined by the war and had enlisted in the Yankee army to continue in the way of life they had learned so well.⁵ Not infrequently men who had fled their fatherland to escape military duty enlisted in the service because there was no other job open to them.⁶ Here they could learn a new language and become imbued with a new way of life, for there was no test of nationality in this army, only the desire to join it and the physical stamina to endure it.⁷ Recruiting officers seldom found more fruitful areas for their operations than the slums of the cities where men were quite willing to accept regular meals and drinking money in return for duties they could frequently avoid.⁸ Others sought out the recruiting detachment just one jump ahead of officers of the law,⁹ while many looked upon the army as free transportation to the mines of the Far West.¹⁰ In country towns, boys answered the call of flashing uniforms and gold braid as readily in this period as they have since armies began. There were other encouragements to the better-reared class of men, but these emanated from the

⁴ King, op. cit., 161 ff.

⁵ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 398.

⁶ Frazier Hunt and Robert Hunt, I Fought with Custer, the Story of Sergeant Windolph, (New York, 1947), 4.

⁷ Parker, op. cit., 17-8.

⁸ Ibid., 16-7.

⁹ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 287.

¹⁰ King, op. cit., 163; Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:96; Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated February 13, 1867.

financial panic of 1873 and not from the service.¹¹ The Army welcomed them all and wistfully watched Congress and hoped for more and always more.

The Indian-fighting Army was a rough, hard-drinking outfit, these recruits discovered, an outfit that fought boredom with Plains whiskey and bare knuckles. It was a polyglot collection of men from all over the world brought together for three to five years and thrown into a savage, never-ending war. Citizens of the United States made up a little more than fifty per cent of the men enlisted in this ten year period.¹² The other half of the men were from all over the world, including three Chinese and two Sandwich Islanders. The largest foreign minority were the Irish, whose twenty per cent of the total enlistments nobly carried the belligerent reputation of Ireland to the depths of the American continent. Germans, too, made a sizeable minority that totaled an average of twelve per cent of the rookies in the service. England, Austria, Belgium, Russia, even Switzerland, and many other nations contributed sons to the Frontier Army of America.

There were regiments of recently freed Negro slaves on the border too, four regiments of Infantry and two regiments of Cavalry. Official records are silent on the subject of colored troops with the exception of the Surgeon-General whose

¹¹ Nelson A. Miles, Serving the Republic, (New York, 1911), 143.

¹² House of Representatives, Miscellaneous Document No. 105, 44 Cong., 1 Sess., 1876. All of the figures in this paragraph come from this document.

annual reports briefly indicate that disease, wounds, and mortality rates average nearly the same for colored troops as for white troops.¹³ Beyond that, the policy of the Army was complete equality. But in the service the situation was not as tranquil as the records appear.

During the period of activation and training of the 10th Cavalry at Fort Riley there was considerable unrest and distrust along Officer's Row where the wives of the absent 7th Cavalry were quartered. The Negro recruits were prone to practice their marksmanship while on guard duty and during their leisure hours by shooting at anything that suggested itself as a target; a habit that frightened the women and forced them to remain in their quarters constantly. The recruits proved to be quite capable of devouring an entire ration in one meal, a habit that resulted in considerable digestive trouble. This, added to their slovenly personal hygiene, led to epidemic diseases, and the garrison suffered small pox and measles in their turn and had scurvy as a constant companion. To the eyes of the observers the experiment seemed doomed to failure. The inexperience of the white officers in dealing with Negroes received most of the blame for that apparent failure. The situation rapidly came to a climax when the troops successfully mutinied against their officers over a real or imagined shortage in the sugar ration. Since they remained unpunished for their

¹³ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867-1876, "Surgeon-General Report."

outbreak, the entire garrison waited in abject fear for another mutiny. From the field came a gallant rescue in the person of Major Gibbs, acting executive officer of the 7th Cavalry. Major Gibbs took charge of the entire situation and within a week had smoothed out many difficulties and in time made the 10th Cavalry an efficient unit of trained soldiers.¹⁴

Once the regiment had been whipped into shape, they took a real pride in their abilities as soldiers, a pride that was shared by their officers.¹⁵ This self-respect manifested itself in the personal appearance of the colored troopers as well as in their combat ability, a manifestation that was notably lacking in their white brothers-in-arms.¹⁶

Whatever their abilities as soldiers might have been, there were several evidences of intolerance and a desire for segregation in the white regiments that saw service with them. Captain George Armes of the 10th Cavalry, in a report dated Fort Dodge, Kansas, April 17, 1879, implies discrimination against his "Brunette" troopers by the refusal to properly supply and re-equip his detachment after they had exhausted their horses and worn out their clothing on an extended scout

¹⁴ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 320 ff. The observer of these events is the wife of Lt. Col. G. A. Custer of Little Big Horn fame. As a reporter of fact, I presume she is correct, but her language is extremely dramatic. It is a matter of record that the 10th Cavalry made quite a name for itself in engagements and scouts that ran the gamut from the rescue of Sandy Forsyth on the Arickaree to a share in the Yellowstone Campaign of 1876.

¹⁵ George A. Armes, Ups and Downs of an Army Officer, (Washington, D. C., 1900), 294.

¹⁶ R. H. McKay, Little Pills, (Pittsburg, Kansas, 1918), 44-5.

through rough country.¹⁷ Just a month earlier, troopers of the 5th Cavalry, a white regiment, had quarrelled violently with troopers of the Tenth; a quarrel near the post theater that ended in an exchange of pistol shots. The Fifth was then reported to be preparing a full-scale attack on the camp of the colored troops, an attack which was fortunately averted by prompt action on the part of the officers of both regiments.¹⁸ At Fort Lyon, Colorado Territory, grumbling by white troopers against serving on guard detail with colored men and against being commanded by colored sergeants was serious enough to force the post commander to impose strict segregation in opposition to the protests of the officers of the colored regiment.¹⁹

Uncle Sam's colored troopers soldiered well and bore their share of monotonous guard duty and scouting details, but they were never quite accepted by the white regiments, except on the battlefield where a man's color faded under the shadow of bullets and arrows.

The service, however, created a unique emotion in men. Whatever their nationality, wherever they found themselves, men developed an esprit de corps. It was an intangible thing, difficult to locate or accurately describe. But until it appears a military unit is little more than a bunch of men held to a leader's bidding by superficial rules and regulations. When it did appear, the unit became a fighting

¹⁷ Armes, op. cit., 293-6.

¹⁸ Ibid., 288.

¹⁹ Roe, op. cit., 103.

machine with but one emotion, a tremendous pride, and a complete subjugation of the individual to the will of the commander and the good of the unit. Normally the unit to which the soldier attaches his affection is the regiment, but the situation in the Indian Wars separated regiments into their smallest basic units, the companies.²⁰ For over a year after its organization, the 7th Cavalry did not work as a unit.²¹ Most of the many garrisons scattered over the Plains area were small one or two company posts.²² Only the older posts near the Missouri River were large enough to quarter half a regiment or more, posts such as Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth in Kansas or Fort Abraham Lincoln in the Dakota Territory. Since the men served their enlistment with a company unit, their loyalty and affection were naturally guided towards it.

This spirit was evidenced in many ways. In the field, the troopers hoarded their equipment in order to present a good company report at the end of the campaign. The company with the greatest predatory ability was sure to report fewer losses of such items as bridles, nose bags, lariats, and picket pins. Other companies accordingly reported compensating losses.²³

²⁰ Until after the period under study, basic administrative units were called companies in the Cavalry and Infantry arms. Not until later did Cavalry units become troops.

²¹ G. A. Custer, op. cit., 190.

²² Secretary of War Annual Report, 1866, 17.

²³ King, op. cit., 156.

The affection of men for their comrades-in-arms is an often told story. Out on the Western Plains the stories mount to heroic proportions as men fought together in a war where recovering the bodies of the dead, even in defeat, was a point of honor.²⁴ On the more humorous side, the unlucky trooper whose horse gave out on the trail was permitted to carry his saddle and equipment for a few miles while his comrades offered him witty advice on his conduct and soldierly bearing. But invariably someone would relieve the waddling trooper of his burden (which would be placed on the wagons) and everyone cheerfully swapped places with him in turn.²⁵ The return of a detachment from a scout would find a carefully concealed anxiety for them evidenced by a hot meal awaiting every man.²⁶

Other situations demonstrate this brotherly feeling even more clearly. There are tales of entire companies leaving camp after tatoo to clean out some gambling den where a comrade had been fleeced by a card shark. Or stories of troopers on pass in town suddenly leaving the bar in a group on hearing that a soldier's horse had been stolen from the hitch rack. The story usually ends in some civilian horse thief being thoroughly frightened and promising to reform

²⁴ This was one of the charges brought against Col. J. J. Reynolds for his actions against Crazy Horses' band in the Powder River area on March 17, 1876. Bourke, op. cit., 280. Later Bourke mentions a number of desertions because the men would not serve under officers who had abandoned their dead and wounded to the enemy. Ibid., 285.

²⁵ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 230-1.
²⁶ Bourke, op. cit., 281.

his way of living, at least where a soldier's property was involved.²⁷

The esprit de corps worked in a disciplinary fashion as well as in a spirit of camaraderie. Not infrequently minor infractions of social and military amenities would be corrected without recourse to formal discipline. A recruit who was so slovenly about bathing that he offended those sleeping nearest him discovered a holy tradition of the service, the forced bath.²⁸ Replacing his lost epidermis once was usually sufficient to convince a man of the healthfulness of oral hygiene.

Thus men lived together, ate together, and worked together. They also played together. Facilities for recreation were naturally limited on the frontier. The "hurry up and wait" method of the Army held men in a nervous tension that demanded some outlet, while the never-ending hours of garrison duty made boredom equal to the Indian in its deadliness. Card playing whiled away many of these hours both in tent and barrack;²⁹ its more innocent form was whist, while poker, the favorite during the War Between the States, occupied, and fleeced, those with loose change and sporting blood. Gambling in all its forms occupied so much attention that the Army's moralists managed to outlaw the vice,³⁰ but according to the evidence of

²⁷ E. B. Custer, Guidon, 155-8.

²⁸ Ibid., 312.

²⁹ Bourke, op. cit., 298.

³⁰ Senate, Report No. 638, 46 Cong., 2 Sess., 1880.

court-martial records this proved to be no deterrent to the gamblers.³¹

However, whiskey probably affected more of the men than gambling. Some believed the desire to drink was one of the most compelling reasons for enlisting in this Army. Here a man could go on a periodic bout with Bacchus with the knowledge that he would not suffer any social stigma from his spree. His punishment would be a short sentence in the guard house after which he would return to duty in the same status as any other man. True, his pay was so small that one month's wages were insufficient to finance a drinking party, but payday came irregularly and the total might make a considerable sum. Also, the retailer of Plains whiskey realized the financial condition of many of his customers and he made the price low enough to reach any man's purse. Every barrel of whiskey received from the States was diluted to make a volume of two to four barrels. This mildly flavored liquor was then thoroughly laced with some concoction that disguised the water and improved the intoxicating qualities of the stuff. The resulting "red eye" was enough to put the toughest trooper under the table.³² This vice seemed to be prevalent in every regiment from the 7th Cavalry, which gained an early reputation³³ and satisfactorily maintained it through the years,³⁴ to the 5th Infantry which had the

³¹ Priest, op. cit., 25.

³² E. B. Custer, Tenting, 373.

³³ Ibid., 250-1.

³⁴ Scott, op. cit., 42.

best record for discipline of any regiment in the service.³⁵ Wherever and whenever the pay master made his infrequent calls, military routines became a farce for a few days and the garrison's energies were absorbed by alcohol and brawls in the gin mills near the reservation.³⁶ As much as ten per cent of a command would end their orgy in the guardhouse for a period of recuperation.³⁷

There were various attempts made at controlling this ancient tradition with varying degrees of success. Some commanders forbid liquor on the reservation, but the thirsty soldier and the saloon keeper both knew the precise limits of that area. Patrols of soldiers could arrest troopers who were caught in the gin mills but the civilian operator was free to do as he pleased. A more successful method was to allow the post sutler to sell whiskey but to limit the number of drinks sold to any one person.³⁸

The post sutler figured largely in the recreation of both officers and men. His establishment was a combined officer's club, post exchange, recreation room for all ranks, grocery store, bank, billiard parlor, and saloon.³⁹ This worthy institution was abolished in 1867 and its functions were in part assumed by the Commissary Department.⁴⁰ But

³⁵ Miles, Personal Recollections, 232.

³⁶ E. B. Custer, Guidon, 286.

³⁷ Parker, op. cit., 16-7.

³⁸ Fort Hays, Orders, Special Order No. 3, dated October 27, 1866.

³⁹ Parker, op. cit., 31.

⁴⁰ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated June 10, 1867.

this legal change aroused such a storm of protest that a substitute was found, the post trader.⁴¹ In actuality the exchange was little more than verbiage since the post trader assumed the same place in the soldier's life as his predecessor, the sutler.

Of course, the troops could and did amuse themselves with some sort of hunting or fishing, either for big game or small game, game fish or pan fish, all of which provided a welcome supplement to the monotonous rations as well as amusement. Much of this sport was impromptu and individual but occasionally a commander offered his men both amusement and training by an organized buffalo hunt.⁴² The propensity of the Indians for attacking small parties was the one serious restriction on this mode of recreation. On those occasions when the hostiles were most active in the area near a post, aspiring nimrods were required to ask the commanding officer's permission before leaving on a hunting expedition.⁴³

Post commanders felt the need for recreation and social life for the men as keenly as their more modern counterparts. They assisted as much as they could by having post theaters constructed from whatever materials were available and by encouraging amateur theatricals.⁴⁴ Clog dancers, accordionists, and fiddle players of no mean talent would combine with amateur

⁴¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867, 11.

⁴² G. A. Custer, op. cit., 69.

⁴³ Fort Hays, Orders, Post Order No. 3, dated June 23, 1867.

⁴⁴ E. B. Custer, Boots and Saddles, 101.

comedians to provide the entire garrison with an evening of hilarious entertainment.⁴⁵ Even on campaigns the command would be beguiled by irrepressible musicians who would smuggle their instruments in a wagon of the supply train.⁴⁶ Regimental bands added professional performances in evening concerts,⁴⁷ and on one occasion a regimental band led troops into battle with their music.⁴⁸

The same band provided the music for the series of company dances that some regiments traditionally held each year. These proved to be gala affairs shared by the enlisted men with the officers and their ladies. The evening was rife with competition as each company tried to out-do the others in decorations and in the supper after the dance. The wise commanding officer would delight his men and become human for a moment. He would gorge himself on the food and satiate his men with his obvious and spoken pleasure.⁴⁹

Such instances were rare indeed, for the enlisted men and officers were rigidly separated by formality and tradition. Generally the men held their officers in awesome reverence, never speaking unless invited and then in the strange language of the third person that the army had devised. This separation served its purpose in the maintenance of discipline; officers and men knew their job and each knew their place in the order

⁴⁵ E. B. Custer, Guidon, 77.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 77-8.

⁴⁷ King, op. cit., 5.

⁴⁸ Vestal, op. cit., 155.

⁴⁹ E. B. Custer, Boots and Saddles, 104.

of things. But the rugged stamp of individualism and the adaptability of the trooper knew no bounds beyond those set up by military tradition, and the evidence of his handiwork is to be seen in every corner of the West.

CHAPTER V

THE LEADERS

The want of discipline was not in the soldiers . . . it was in officers coming fresh to the command who were unequal to the wiles of Indians, and despised . . . caution.¹ Colonel H. B. Carrington, Commanding 18th United States Infantry.

The Officer Corps

Authority, discipline, and training in the United States Army is premised on a unique assumption. In the armies of Europe the officer is a leader in battle, a planner of strategy and tactics, while the responsibility for training and discipline devolves upon the noncommissioned officer. But tradition in the American Army relieves the enlisted grades of all responsibility, while the officer leads, commands, and trains his men. Due to this situation, the ability and efficiency of the American Army depends directly on the officer corps. The officer, of course, enjoys certain privileges as compensation for this acceptance of responsibility. These privileges are broadly lumped into one premise, the officer is accountable for his own actions. For instance, the officer who paid his initial call on Mrs. Custer while in a drunken condition realized the rashness of his act and wisely resigned his commission. Had he not resigned, he would surely have been court-martialled and cashiered out of the service for conduct

¹ Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.² There were, under such a system, no prerequisites for a commission, and the result was many political appointments without regard to the appointee's ability, especially in the organization of the new regiments in 1866.³ Many officers in this new army were from the regiments of volunteers that had been recently demobilized. This group, probably the majority of the officers of the new regular army, had no idea of the discipline or customs of the service and were thereby handicapped by their approach to the peace-time army.⁴ Some men were commissioned from the ranks and these, though frequently efficient officers, had difficulty in surmounting the caste barriers of a group entirely surrounded by reserved emotions and hoary custom.⁵

As a rule, in the cavalry arm, the company officers were not thorough horsemen,⁶ a situation that caused a decrease in the efficiency of that arm. In fact, some of the new officers had to learn to ride after joining their regiment, an educative program that provided much amusement to the onlookers (and a basket of champagne for every fall),⁷ but boded ill for men led into battle by these neophytes of Mars.

One result of this rather haphazard selection of officers was an enormous number of courts-martial. These officers lacked

² E. B. Custer, Tenting, 257.

³ Ibid., 262.

⁴ Ibid., 237.

⁵ Ibid., 262.

⁶ King, op. cit., 156-7.

⁷ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 265.

the necessary experience to hold the respect and maintain the discipline of a group of men without invoking the aid of military courts to enforce their decisions. The scattering of regiments to company posts threw the task of molding and holding the discipline of the Army on the shoulders of those least prepared to execute the task.⁸ The fact that the majority of the officers were probably veterans of the school of war was more of a liability than an asset. They felt superior to any study of tactics or leadership and their ideas infected the whole corps of officers with a disdain for books⁹ and promoted the loose easy-going discipline so prevalent in volunteer armies and so detrimental to professional soldiers in a peace-time army.

The system of promotion and retirement also added to the inertia and the inefficiency of the officer corps in the first years after the war. At the end of the first decade after 1866, the officer corps was still filled with veterans of the War Between the States. Gray-haired lieutenants were nothing unusual in the Indian-fighting Army. One retired at 64, still a first lieutenant.¹⁰ The rigidity of the system of advancement was fixed by law and it was one of the greatest weaknesses of the Army. The retirement list was limited to seven per cent of the strength of the officer corps.¹¹ Thus officers who had

⁸ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1868, 61.

⁹ Parker, op. cit., 23.

¹⁰ Downey, op. cit., 21.

¹¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1869, 1:27.

reached the age where they could no longer perform their duties had to be retained on the active list, even though absent from the regiment, or ungraciously dismissed from the service. Needless to say, they were retained, thus completely blocking the system of promotion. Furthermore, the grades of captain and below were promoted within the officer's regiment; a system that had the merit of building the feeling and pride in the unit, but whose value cannot be fully realized when the chances for advancement are so completely retarded.¹² Above the rank of captain, promotion was entirely based on the individual's grade and seniority on the list of officers of his grade in the entire army without regard for ability or for total length of service. Promotion depended on the death, dismissal, resignation, or retirement of the ranking officers of the Army.¹³

Whatever merits could be found in this system were completely overbalanced by its debilitating effects. There was no inducement for an officer to become efficient in his profession. Present for duty and the absence of court-martial proceedings on his record were all that were necessary to insure his advancement, if he could only muster sufficient patience. Marshalling sufficient patience to remain in grade 12 to 20 years was a difficult task. Since the study of war was out of fashion, the officer had many hours of idleness while he was in garrison. There was much guard duty to be done, but drill

¹² Parker, op. cit., 47.

¹³ E. B. Custer, Guidon, 282.

of any sort was either short or nonexistent. [Captain John Bourke told of the endless monotony of the daily routine in a single paragraph:

Guard mounting took place either before or after breakfast, according to season, and then followed the routine of the day: inspecting the men's mess at breakfast, dinner, and supper; a small amount of drill, afternoon stables, dress or undress parade at retreat or sundown, and such other occupation as might suggest itself in the usual visit to the herd to see that the pasture selected was good, and that the guards were vigilant; some absorption in the recording of the proceedings of garrison courts-martial and boards of survey, and then general ennui, unless the individual possessed enough force to make work for himself.¹⁴

The types of work that men made for themselves was varied enough, but the number of men that tried to work were comparatively few. Some officers studied foreign language, mineralogy, botany, history, constitutional or international law, and literature, the choice depending on individual taste and the material available for study. Hunting was a relaxation when it could be classified as sport and not a foolishly accepted chance.¹⁵ But the temptations of cards, billiards, and liquor attracted many who succumbed to ennui. Ranking officers frequently intimidated younger men to gamble at cards far beyond the limit of their pay.¹⁶ Hard drinking, too, was attractive in the eyes of many men in their seeking to escape from inescapable monotony. All of which detracted from their efficiency if not from their chances of promotion.

¹⁴ Bourke, op. cit., 12.

¹⁵ Loc. cit.

¹⁶ Senate, Report No. 638, 46 Cong., 2 Sess., 1880.

To escape all of this was practically impossible. Officers stayed with the same regiment through most of their career, and the high cost of transportation prevented any periodic shifting of regiments, had that been desirable. Extended leaves of absence were out of the question, even for those who had served several years without leave. An officer was allowed 30 days leave per year and any authorized absence beyond that length of time was taken at half pay. Furthermore, there was no provision for accumulation of leave time. When the travel time necessary to reach the states from an isolated outpost was subtracted from the 30 days, there was little or no time to enjoy the leave.¹⁷ Since most officers, especially of the lower grades, could not afford even a month at half pay, they were, in actual practice, confined to the West without any prospect of a break for many years at a time. The only real means of reaching home was to bring home to the Army, and many officers took their wives to the farthest outposts for that reason. In some instances the government strongly encouraged this practice.¹⁸

17 House of Representatives, Executive Document No. 155, 43 Cong., 1 Sess., 1874. Later in this year the law was changed to give an officer sixty days leave without reduction in pay. Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:xxv.

18 Vestal, op. cit., 93.

The Women

The encouragement offered to married officers by the government appeared only in the paper directives because that same government thought very little of making the quarters on the frontier posts attractive to women. This was sufficient encouragement for any army wife. They took the poorly built quarters in stride; they papered the walls with illustrations from Harper's Bazaar and grew indigenous vining plants to cover the walls of some rooms. They allowed their imagination free rein in devising ingenuous means to add to the comfort and beauty of their homes. They planted gardens, nursed them through the early growth, then, more often than not, moved to another post before they could enjoy the fruit of their effort. They were angry with the Army and with the Indians when conditions forced them to return East. The least possibility of rejoining their husbands saw them braving the rattling day coaches, the indigestible food, and vermin-ridden lodgings of the railroad taverns to get back to the dangers, joys, sorrows, and discomforts of some outpost on the Great Plains. The chance remark that the army wife seemed to marry only for love evoked the now classic outburst, "Good heavens! What else could she marry for?"¹⁹ And there seemed, indeed, little else.

¹⁹ E. B. Custer, Guidon, 282. All three of Mrs. Custer's books present excellent and humourous accounts of army wives.

Their position in the post family was tenuous at best, and they, like everyone else, were under the orders of the post commander and subject to discipline by him. Not that the Army was wise enough to provide for their control by specific regulations, but commanding officers customarily and humorously used the Army Regulation pertaining to camp followers as a legal control over the wives of officers.²⁰

Army women had a choice field for the exercise of industrial pursuits and many learned for the first time what was done in the kitchen and the sewing room.²¹ Lack of servants drew no apology from harassed Army wives. Those persons enticed away from the relative luxury of the East to serve in the household of an army officer in the West soon learned their high value as laundresses and the fortunes that could be made by selling pies to enlisted men. They soon became haughty and disputant and would finally quit their job as a domestic and launch a private enterprise in marriage and bad cooking. Shops were simply not available to furnish the clothing needed by a growing family. The only alternative was hand sewing, and patterns, fashion magazines, and flying needles set the pace for the social life of the genteel woman and promoted the pioneer institution, the sewing bee. Preparing meals, too was a difficult problem. The ordinary army ration, purchased from the Commissary Department, was the staple in the

20 E. B. Custer, Boots and Saddles, 129-30.

21 Carrington, op. cit., 173-4.

family larder. About the only addition to that palate-dulling food was ingenuity, and experienced army wives could make tempting dishes from almost nothing.²² The winds of the prairie, too, were mischievous and troublesome to the woman living in a frontier post. Long skirts and playful gales revealed many a pretty ankle and reddened many a gentle face until some woman hit upon the idea of lead slugs sewed into the hems of skirts. The additional weight was adequately compensated by the feeling of propriety.²³ The danger from Indian outbreaks did not pass them by any more than the winds, and, once the children were accounted for, women did their share of the watching whenever an alarm was sounded.²⁴

The terror these women suffered during the tour of duty in the West can be easily imagined. The personal danger was sufficient to discourage less hardy souls. However, the lonely fear that filled their hearts at parting with their men was stifling in its hot rush, and it remained until the happy day when the outfit would return from its excursion into the unknown. The traditional "Girl I Left Behind Me," played by the band as troopers left garrison, was a sharp discord of panic and dread in the ears of these women. The constant companionship with fear made them a gregarious lot, generous to a fault, and always willing to avoid a quarrel while their men were absent.²⁵

22 Roe, op. cit., 27.

23 E. B. Custer, Tenting, 256.

24 Carrington, op. cit., 158.

25 E. B. Custer, Boots and Saddles, 188.

It was in this ever-present fear that the wives of officers and enlisted men felt their only kinship. Always separated by a social barrier if not by a legal barrier, they nevertheless suffered kindred emotions that tended to temporarily breach the customs of the service. But at that point, all similarity and contact ceased. Whereas marriage of officers was tacitly provided for by the allowance of quarters and rations, the marriage of enlisted men was regulated by law and every discouragement to such action was presented. A soldier was required to ask permission of his commanding officer before marrying. The number of married enlisted men on the post was to be limited to four per company and their wives were to be employed as laundresses for the command. As laundresses they then became eligible to receive one ration and such quarters as could be provided.²⁶

In spite of such regulations, the number of shacks in "Suds Row" often exceeded the total allowed by the tables of organization.²⁷ The hardship and poverty of the inhabitants of "Suds Row" was the subject of many regulatory attempts. But regulation and law have never solved social problems unless the people who came under their enforcement were convinced of the need for them, in the army or in any other part of the population. The army people helped each other to enjoy their chosen life as much as the circumstances would allow and politely ignored all such regulations.

²⁶ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:6.
²⁷ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:96.

CHAPTER VI

THE NOVICES

He who sets his foot in the stirrup must mount to the saddle.¹
Tamerlane, the Earth Shaker.

Review of the General Factors of the Military Problem

The birth pains of this Indian-fighting Army were long and enduring. The fundamental problems that face any army in its struggle to become a fighting machine were intensified in the Great Plains area of the United States. These problems can be broadly classified as personnel, supply, geographic, and administrative, and to all these family troubles must be added the enemy.

The men that enlisted in the Regular Army were not the highest caliber men; they were the floating debris of a nation just emerging from a long war. Furthermore, they were not awokened to any sense of duty or encouraged to become professional soldiers by the living conditions that they experienced on the frontier. The temporary quarters soon became unfit for habitation because of lack of funds to make necessary repairs. Spoiled rations and epidemic diseases frightened many men into risking punishment for desertion. Poorly-made uniforms added nothing to their pride in the service nor did those uniforms protect a man from the savage weather of the prairies and mountains. The isolation of the garrisons of the West settled like a deadly pall on men's minds and their hardest struggles

¹ Harold Lamb, Tamerlane, the Earth Shaker, (Garden City, New York, c. 1938), 167.

were controlling their own passions and combating the dreadful lethargy produced by idleness. Neither soldier nor officer adequately understood the division of duties between the Army and the Indian Bureau. Administratively the Army was stationed in these outposts of civilization to preserve the peace and to protect property, yet the Indian considered the soldier fair game at all times. The orders of the Army prevented any offensive action by any troop leader without directions from the Indian Bureau and the illusion of peace was enhanced by the presence of women and children on every post. But troopers were in the saddle at daybreak prepared to beat off an attack every day they were in the field.

The high command was aware of most of these problems and it worked assiduously toward their solution. Health problems were largely solved in the first five years of the decade. The food was improved in quality if not in quantity and the suitability of the uniform was taken under study. The quality of the enlisted men continued to plague field commanders throughout the period but tradition slowly began to accumulate around certain heroes and a feeling of unity within the outfits began to increase.

Paradoxically, these same troublesome factors were instrumental in eventually molding this Army into a powerful military force. Whatever difficult problems the enemy, the terrain, the lack of troops, and logistics imposed on these soldiers, those same things forced young officers to accept complete responsibility.

The whip lash of necessity drove them to discipline, train, and lead their men into battle in the face of overwhelming odds, and to emerge victorious and capable leaders.

The inherent, variegated conflicts of this story must be brought into proper chronological order before the will-o-the-wisp cause-effect relationships that the twentieth-century mind so avidly seeks can be discovered.

The decade under consideration opened with the hasty demobilization of the army after the War Between the States. The year 1866 found the Army struggling through a reorganization that practically amounted to a reconstitution of the armed forces of the nation.² In the midst of this reorganization the Army undertook to chastise the red men for a series of depredations through extensive campaigns in both the Department of the Missouri and the Department of the Platte. This operation failed completely. Both commands were defeated by lack of troops and supplies before they took the field. The chief result of the whole affair was the arousing of the anger of all the Indian tribes of the Plains and an increase in the depredations of war parties.

Here, in brief form, was the situation on the Western Frontier in 1866. The clue to the fluctuations of the efficiency of the United States Army during the next ten years can be seen in the numbers of men recruited each year to maintain the armed forces at their authorized strength.

² Hafen, op. cit., 337.

In 1866, the recruiting service enlisted more than 38,000 men to re-establish the Regular Army.³ The following year Congress authorized the establishment of several new regiments which the recruiting service struggled to fill. But the 31,980 recruits sent out to the line regiments were thousands more than were needed for the authorized expansion. However, there were 10,000 desertions during the year, indicating an extremely low morale in the service.⁴ This high rate of recruiting continued in 1868 and it jumped upward again the next year. The peak of the recruiting, however, came in 1871 when 21,567 men were enlisted, despite no increase in the numerical strength of the Army. The corresponding low ebb in morale was attributed by contemporary officers of the army to the reduction of the pay scale of the enlisted men. The next year, an alarmed Congress passed a new pay bill which assured the soldier a lump sum of money to be received from the paymaster upon completion of the first term of honorable service. The desired effect was achieved in time; during the next two years it was only necessary to enlist 12,000 new men per year. The continued decline in desertions and the increase in re-enlistments was indicative of an increase in the morale of the armed forces, though part of the drop in recruiting in 1873 can no doubt be traced to the financial panic of that

³ House of Representatives, Miscellaneous Document No. 105,
⁴ 44 Cong., 1 Sess., 1876. All figures in this paragraph
that concern recruiting are from this document.

⁴ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:164.

year. However, in 1874 only 4,821 men were recruited. This figure can be simply explained by the fact that Congress ordered the reduction of the strength of the army from 30,000 to 25,000 men.

This graphic illustration of the disaffections of the soldiers of the Regular Army during this decade is striking. Just as the need for large numbers of recruits in the years 1867 and 1868 vividly points out the effect of bad rations and epidemic disease on the morale of the soldiers, so the other fluctuations in recruiting illustrate the tensions in discipline and morale that influenced the efficiency of the Indian-fighting Army as a military force.

Further consideration of the development of the character of this Army can best be seen in a chronological development that will permit a more detailed examination of those difficulties that required several years for their solution. In this exposition it will be convenient to divide the material into three periods. The first period falls naturally in the years 1866 to 1868, the period of reorganization of the Army until Sheridan began formulating his plans for a winter campaign against the Southern Tribes. The second period will describe Sheridan's efforts and carry the development to the Black Hills Exploration in 1874. The third period will then cover those restless years of tension that closed the decade (1874-1876) and resulted in the final defeat of all the Plains Indian Tribes.

From Nothing to the Washita, 1866 - 1868

With its usual genius for understatement, the War Department reported in 1866 that there were a large number of desertions, "from various causes arising out of the unsettled state of the army."⁵ In the lower echelons of the hierarchy, there were more blunt statements of the situations. One officer ordered a new lock placed on the stables since he had insufficient men to mount a 24-hour guard over the horses -- and could not trust the men if he had them.⁶ These first years of reorganization were almost too much for the recruiting service, since desertions thinned the ranks as rapidly as they could be filled. Inasmuch as the pay scale of the army was still based on the high scale established during the War (\$16.00 per month for privates),⁷ there appeared to be no reason for the many desertions on that score. The paymasters paid most of the garrisons regularly; the exceptions being those posts where travel consumed 40 to 70 days for the round trip.⁸ Supplies of clothing and equipment, too, were sufficient since enormous amounts of uniforms, blankets, tentage, etc., were on hand⁹ in supply depots relatively near most of the garrisons.¹⁰ There seemed to be little material reason for the state of morale in the service in 1866.

⁵ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1866, 83.

⁶ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated July 23, 1866.

⁷ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1871, 1:73.

⁸ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1868, 179.

⁹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867, 207.

¹⁰ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1868, 165.

The "various causes" so artfully avoided by the War Department were to be found outside the service. Unit commanders were constantly plagued by the desertions. They were wondering if they would command enough men to put their regiment in the field against the Indians. One commander, in searching for causes for this epidemic, opined that the high wages offered men as laborers in the mines and the lightness of the maximum sentence for the crime of desertion (six months at hard labor) combined to make enlisted men consider the risk of being caught and punished as trivial when compared to their reward should they succeed in deserting.¹¹ There was a total lack of pride in the unit or loyalty toward the service in this new Army. The medley of men drawn together in these garrisons was not bound by any emotional purpose; their only reasons for enlisting, as in all professional armies, were personal.

The ordnance of this new Army, like its clothing and equipment, came largely from surplus stock piles. The Cavalry and some light Infantry units were supplied with available breech-loading carbines of various patterns. But the bulk of the troops, the Infantry, still carried a miscellaneous collection of rifled muzzle-loading weapons. Plans were being made to convert the standard Springfield rifle-musket into a breech-loader,¹² but a year was to pass and

¹¹ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated February 13, 1867.

¹² Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1866, 5.

many men were to die before this modern weapon would be in the hands of the troops.

The lesson that was driven into the military mind at the first battle of Bull Run had long since been lost. Men were still not trained before they were assigned to units. Even those that remained in the recruiting depot six weeks learned little more than dismounted drill and "how to groom a horse in regulation style."¹³ Again and again field commanders remarked on recruits being assigned to the companies without the most rudimentary knowledge of soldiering. These same men were assigned to duty "as arduous and hazardous as in time of war"¹⁴ but a multitude of duties occupied so much of their time that they could not be instructed in marksmanship, or even in the loading of their assigned weapon. Furthermore, the tables of organization made no provision for the assignment of company-grade officers to such necessary duties as staff duty and recruiting service. This situation frequently left only one officer on duty with the company, and his time would be so taken up with scouting, escorting, and other duties that he had little time to train his men.¹⁵ The result of all this was that units were composed almost entirely of recruits. These men would take the field, even after one or two years service, with little or no instruction in the exercise of the individual soldier in battle.

¹³ E. A. Brininstool, A Trooper with Custer, (Columbus, Ohio, 1925), 20.

¹⁴ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873, 1:88.

¹⁵ Loc. cit.

Such, then, was the situation in general during the early years of the decade. The new Army lacked any esprit de corps, and its men, though initially supplied and equipped adequately, were armed with a variety of obsolete weapons and assigned to regular duty with no training. Superhuman efforts would be required to accomplish anything with such a force. Yet the most important expedition sent out in the year 1866 suffered from most of these faults and from others even more glaring and detrimental to its success.

On May 19, 1866, Colonel H. B. Carrington marched toward the Sioux's favorite hunting ground, the Powder River area, with orders to establish posts and protect the Bozeman Trail for emigrant travel. His force consisted of the Second Battalion of the 18th Infantry, about 800 men, of whom 511 were recruits who had not been with the organization a week.¹⁶ This force marched into a country where 3,000 cavalrymen led by General Connor had been badly defeated only one year before.¹⁷ As the unit approached hostile country, the commander became acutely aware of the deficiency of the army transport system. At Fort Laramie, where the 18th Infantry expected to receive sufficient supplies of ammunition and rations to carry them through most of the summer, they found only four day's supply of deteriorated hardtack and no utensils to bake bread to make up for the deficiency. Moreover,

¹⁶ Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

¹⁷ Vestal, op. cit., 92.

they secured only 1,000 rounds of ammunition of the proper caliber for their antiquated rifle-muskets.¹⁸

In the true Army tradition, the 18th Infantry moved on into the Powder River country and began building the posts as they had been ordered to do. The enormous task of construction, as well as carrying dispatches and escorting emigrants and supply trains, fell, as usual, to the soldiers. Red Cloud and his Sioux warriors, in a very un-Indian fashion, kept up continuous skirmishes and attacks on every detail of men that ventured outside the post. His persistence in these tactics amounted to a virtual state of seige for the garrison.

The supply and man-power situation did not improve for the white men. Ammunition supplies were reduced to practically nothing,¹⁹ there were insufficient officers to direct and control the command, and the laboring troops had no time to become acquainted with their profession as soldiers.

Colonel Carrington's urgent requests for a unit of Cavalry to aid his mounted Infantry were stingily answered by scattered detachments armed with a variety of weapons coming to Fort Phil Kearny as escorts for trains. Other detachments slowly arrived, but their value was not enhanced by the fact that they had never been instructed in military procedures,

¹⁸ Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

¹⁹ Amounts of ammunition available at one time were; Fort C. F. Smith, ten rounds per man; Fort Phil Kearny, forty-five rounds per man; Fort Reno, thirty rounds per man. G. A. Custer, op. cit., 115.

even in such rudimentary movements as mounting a horse.²⁰

Quartermaster clothing, too, proved to be insufficient and inadequate as the cold winter of Wyoming closed in about these isolated troops. It became necessary to abandon any idea of uniform dress and allow the men to suit themselves. The resulting costumes of wolf skin caps, buffalo-hide boots, and bear skin overcoats were wierd uniforms for organized troops even though they proved effective protection against the cold.²¹

Training in the business of being a soldier depended on the energy of the company officers, and it was confined to moments of drill at retreat formation where they were instructed in firing in volleys by squads. But such training had little effect since, in battle, the officers sometimes ordered fire at extreme ranges; on one occasion revolvers were fired at several hundred yards range, a ridiculous effort, but one ordered by a commissioned officer.²² By fall, however, officers and men were slowly learning to reserve their fire and to handle their weapons with some effectiveness, largely as a result of daily intimate contact with hostiles.

In spite of these difficulties, the very things that enhanced them -- the isolation, the daily skirmishing, and the construction work -- helped to mold an esprit de corps and strengthen the feeling of discipline in the command.

²⁰ Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

²¹ Carrington, op. cit., 212-3.

²² Senate, Executive Document No. 33, 50 Cong., 1 Sess., 1887.

The necessity of depending on the individual's mechanical skill during the building of the post tended to undermine the traditional obedience to orders of non-commissioned officers. Nevertheless, there was no serious grumbling, little drunkenness, constant willingness to approach any task, and alertness to the dangers of the situation.

Yet the Indians won the final decision in this attempt of the white man to open up new territory. The lack of man-power, modern ordnance, ammunition, and proper equipment to face the northern climate, coupled with the constant pressure by the Indians and the disastrous Fetterman Massacre,²³ caused the Army to order the abandonment of the area and the closing of the Bozeman Trail.

In the early spring of 1867, the Ordnance Department began to issue the converted Springfield rifle-musket to infantry troops in the Division of the Missouri,²⁴ and by July of that year nearly all of the Infantry stationed in that military division were armed with the new breech-loading rifle.²⁵ Immediate reports from the field were enthusiastic. Both the rifle and its ammunition were considered the final word in infantry small-arms by the field commanders.²⁶ Now the Army began thinking about standardizing all the small-arms of the

²³ On December 21, 1866, Brevet Lt. Col. Fetterman and eighty men were wiped out by the Sioux when the Colonel disobeyed the orders of his commanding officer and attacked a superior force of hostiles; an attack that was unnecessary since the objective, relief of a wood train, was effected before he made contact with the hostiles.

²⁴ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated April 27, 1867.

²⁵ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867, 229.

Ibid., 46.

service with respect to caliber and construction. But the Cavalry continued for some years to use a variety of large caliber carbines.

So began the slow development of an efficient armed force. The improvement in weapons, the conviction of the limitations on expansion imposed by the lack of troops, and the growth of a feeling of unity in the line regiments was a definite step forward. But the events in the organization of the newly activated regiments threw a dull cloud on the otherwise clearing horizon.

The 7th Cavalry, one of these new regiments, was activated at Fort Riley, Kansas, on July 28, 1866.²⁷ Immediately the problem of desertions began to haunt Lt. Col. George A. Custer, its commander. Acutely aware of the amount of public funds expended by the government in recruiting each man and of the prospect of a summer campaign with a decimated command, Colonel Custer urged the War Department to increase the severity of the punishment for deserters.²⁸ By March of that year, he reported that the increase in the rate of desertion from his command had risen meteorically from 120 percent to 240 percent.²⁹ Two days later he resigned

²⁷ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1866, 73.

²⁸ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated February 13, 1867.

Lt. Col. Custer estimated the cost of recruiting, transportation to Fort Riley, clothing, equipping, and mounting a trooper at \$7,000.00, a not unlikely figure.

²⁹ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated March 6, 1867.

himself to a guard house full of prisoners as his principal command.³⁰

Even in the midst of these difficulties, and before its organization had been completed, detachments of the 7th Cavalry were on outpost duty in four posts west of Fort Riley.³¹ Both men and horses were the rawest sort of recruits when they moved out to the theater of active operations. The cumbersome equipment tied about the saddle, the overburdened, uncomfortable recruit, and the skittish, half-frightened horse were not reassuring to the worried pioneer who was living in daily fear of the hateful attack of the nomadic Indians. Still, this regiment was the only Cavalry available in the Department of the Missouri,³² so out into the unkind prairies rode these babes of war.

It was the same story over again, the urgency of the situation left no time for training. All too frequently the first shot fired from the recruit's recently issued carbine was aimed in the general direction of a hostile Indian.³³ Even those who were veterans of the late war were unsettled by the irregular charge and retreat tactics of this new foe. Like their compatriots to the north, the officers and men

³⁰ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated March 8, 1867. The Colonel morsely explained that he would soon be forced to place the apprehended deserters in a company barrack and the evicted company in the guard house.

³¹ Fort Riley, Letters, letter dated March 8, 1867. These posts were Fort Harker, Fort Lyon, Fort Wallace, and Fort Morgan.

³² Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867, 35.

³³ E. B. Custer, Guidon, 8.

learned their trade in actual combat. Drill, that repetitious fixing of reflexive response to command, came wherever troops were located and whenever there was time. During the summer, the men stationed at Fort Hays were drilled every evening³⁴ in the intricate evolutions of the cavalry arm after spending the day on picket duty, guarding the horse herd, and the other innumerable time-consuming tasks of a cavalry unit. Occasionally buffalo hunts were organized with the express purpose of training men and horses in the use of firearms and in horsemanship,³⁵ a method consciously or unconsciously taken from the training manual of the noble red man. Thus, as the regiment served its function as a protector of homesteaders, it was slowly metamorphosed into a machine of war.

Just as Colonel Carrington's men suffered from the parsimonious issue of supplies, so the Seventh was weakened by insufficient and spoiled rations. Boxes of provisions were found to contain little more than stones; hardtack was issued to the troops that had been baked six years before. Bacon and flour were stored on the open prairie with only a tarpaulin for covering until the heat made the bacon rancid and the rains made the flour moldy. Such food was perforce issued with the expected result in scurvy and disease in the troops of the entire region. Cholera, too, appeared to further unsettle the morale of the men. Men fled from the

³⁴ Fort Hays, Orders, Special Order No. 58, dated July 27, 1867.

³⁵ G. A. Custer, op. cit., 69.

Army to escape these plagues, and any scouting expedition that approached the mining regions was sure to have some men desert.³⁶

Desertion became as infectious as the diseases that were partially its cause. On one scouting expedition, 13 men deserted in broad daylight just as the regiment prepared to move out on the march.³⁷ On another occasion a first-sergeant and 40 men took flight during the night leaving their captain and 20 comrades stranded at a small post on the South Platte River.³⁸

Such insubordination and lack of discipline was the direct consequence of the evils of the service. Half-starved, discouraged men, who had been thrown into a summer-long series of fruitless scouting expeditions with no basic military training and whose officers were inexperienced in controlling troops and poorly trained in this type of warfare, were sure to take the matter into their own hands and escape such unnecessary suffering if the opportunity offered itself.

These conditions, plus the fixation in the military mind that only cavalry could successfully overcome Indians, forced General Hancock, the Department of the Missouri commander, to assume a defensive strategy. Some officers despaired of ever successfully taking the field with such green troops as heavily laden as the United States Cavalry

³⁶ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 394.

³⁷ G. A. Custer, op. cit., 100.

³⁸ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 395.

against an opponent whose remount and commissary were assets rather than impedimenta.³⁹ But the high command was certain that only defensive measures were possible due to lack of troops and transport.⁴⁰

The resulting strategy was the aforementioned scattering of regiments to small posts at what was hoped were strategical points. But General Sherman, commanding the Division of the Missouri, was the champion of the necessity for offensive action. He realized the difficulties of continuously transporting supplies into such a vast arena, and the truly enormous numbers of troops that would be necessary to adequately control that area by defensive measures.⁴¹

Despite the lack of cavalry troops, Sherman pursued that policy to the best of his ability by keeping all available Cavalry units in the field and moving towards the spot where hostiles had last been reported.⁴² This he well realized, would not suffice and he made plans to take more decisive measures. As his first step, Sherman had General Philip Sheridan recalled from the South and installed him in the command of the Department of the Missouri in place of General Hancock.⁴³

Sheridan surveyed the situation personally, moved his headquarters from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Hays, and began to formulate his plan.

³⁹ Trobriand, op. cit., 55.

⁴⁰ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1877, 17.

⁴¹ Senate, Executive Document No. 7, 40 Cong., 1 Sess., 1867.

⁴² Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1867, 35.

⁴³ Ibid., 56.

CHAPTER VII

THE CONQUERORS

The soldier of long years should not lack either rank or payment. For these men, who give up permanent happiness for perishable honor are worthy of reward.¹
Tamerlane, the Earth-Shaker.

From the Washita to the Black Hills, 1868 - 1874

General Philip Henry Sheridan was Irish, 37, and aggressive when he assumed command of the Department of the Missouri. His personal dash and courage had turned the tide at Winchester in 1864. His thoroughness and aggressive attitude on the Mexican border had intimidated the waning support of the Emperor Maximilian in 1865. His administrative and policy-making abilities had been tested and found true in the Gulf Command and occupation duties in 1866. Now he brought all of these forces to bear on the hostilities of the Southern Plains Tribes. A short inspection tour in March, 1868, convinced him of the Indian's discontent with the terms of the Medicine Lodge Treaty.² The sporadic but effective Indian raids continued through the summer and they convinced the General of the need for decisive offensive action.³

¹ Lamb, op. cit., 167.

² The Medicine Lodge Treaty was made in October, 1867, near Medicine Lodge, Kansas. The treaty placed the Indians on reservations and granted them annuities, schools, farm equipment, etc., in return. The only official interpreter spoke Comanche and many of the attending Indians may never have understood what the powwow was about. Nye, op. cit., 58.

³ Michael V. Sheridan, Personal Memoirs of Philip Henry Sheridan, (New York, 1902), 2:284-97.

The experience of that summer also convinced him of the futility of pursuing raiding parties over long distances. The idea grew in his mind that the only time the Army could decisively engage an Indian force was in winter when the nomads were immobilized by lack of forage for their horses.⁴ With these thoughts in mind, General Sheridan projected a long range plan. Cavalry units in the field were ordered to conserve their horses and abstain from any pursuit of raiding parties unless the chance of success was obvious. A depot of supplies was opened near the area of expected operations. Enough rations, ammunition, and forage were assembled at that point for a winter-long campaign. Plainsmen were selected as scouts. Reinforcements were requested, and when these proved insufficient, the State of Kansas was asked to muster a volunteer cavalry regiment. The 7th Cavalry was pulled out of the field, and the entire regiment was re-equipped, drilled in maneuver, and intensively trained in marksmanship,⁵ a practice almost as revolutionary as the idea of a winter campaign on the Plains.

Jim Bridger, the famous scout, said it was foolish to go out on the prairie in the winter, but by October the preliminary arrangements were completed. In November the various columns moved on the rendezvous area about 100 miles south of Fort Dodge at a point which they named Camp Supply. From this base, the troops struck directly into hostile country. The

⁴ Ibid., 297.

⁵ G. A. Custer, op. cit., 190.

campaign was not ended until March, 1869.⁶ It was the most decisive blow ever struck by the Army. The Southern Tribes, the Cheyennes, Kiowas, and Arapahoes, were forced into the new reservation established at Fort Sill, which post had been founded during the campaign.⁷ Not that this ended all Indian hostilities in the area.⁸ Warfare like that fought on the Plains never ends except with annihilation or, as finally did occur, with the destruction of the economic strength of the Indian -- his horse and the buffalo.

The Army now appeared to be a truly effective force, at least in the newspapers. However, even by the standards of military efficiency its potential was improving. There was concrete evidence of the growth of unity in the regiments.⁹ Hard campaigning brought out the professional pride of the Regulars and grumbling was at a minimum.¹⁰ The new breech-loading Springfield rifle was now in the hands of all infantry-

⁶ The campaign was highlighted by Custer's destruction of the Cheyenne village of Black Kettle on the Washita. Skeptics and critics frequently view this attack with horror and they recall that the same chief had been the leader of the group so barbarically attacked at Sand Creek. That this band was worthy of annihilation is clearly shown in General Sheridan's report. Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1869, 1:47-8.

⁷ W. S. Nye, Carbine and Lance, (Norman, 1937), 123. The first stake was held by General Sheridan and driven by Pvt. Johnny Murphy, the General's ambulance driver, on January 8, 1869.

⁸ Mrs. Frank C. Montgomery, "Fort Wallace and Its Relation to the Frontier," Collections of the Kansas State Historical Association, 17:239, 1926-28; Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1869, 1:53-5. The latter is a tabulation of reported Indian depredations in the years 1868 and 1869.

⁹ Armes, op. cit. 288.
¹⁰ Ibid., 293-4.

men. Cavalry weapons, too, were standardized. Two patterns were still in use, the Spencer and the Sharps, but both were .50 caliber and both used fixed ammunition.¹¹ There was little complaining about rations, either as to quantity or quality. Health standards were improving also. The Quartermaster General was a bit disgusted with the vanity of the line troopers. His surplus stocks of large size clothing were being depleted because the men, dissatisfied with the effect gained from any of the four standard sizes, were prone to requisition clothing larger than they could wear and to have them fitted by their company tailor.¹² However, the men's complaints against the equipment were more relevant to the efficiency of the service. Blankets were reported to be of a very inferior quality and unit pride was not improved by the issuing of coats and trousers of various shades of blue. Such a condition generated a complete lack of uniformity in the dress of companies.¹³ The design of tents, too, needed to be changed to fit the climatic conditions of the West. The square-cornered A-tents were blown helter-skelter by the winds. The Sibley, which was infrequently used, was rounded and much more secure.¹⁴

These complaints were minor, but steps were wisely taken to eliminate them. A process to prevent moth damage and mildew and to waterproof clothing was adopted,¹⁵ and by 1873 a

¹¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1869, 1:442.

¹² Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1870, 1:148.

¹³ Ibid., 92.

¹⁴ E. B. Custer, Tenting, 347-8.

¹⁵ House of Representatives, Executive Document No. 189, 42 Cong., 3 Sess., 1873.

new uniform was selected and issued, though some of the more distant posts were not supplied with them until the next year.¹⁶ In 1870, the Inspector General reported an improvement in police and sanitation, and in drill and military exercise.¹⁷

But this idyllic progress was halted by the ghost of the military in the United States, a parsimonious Congress. The first move made by that august body proved to be most beneficial. The officer corps was over-loaded with officers who had been granted permanent commissions during the War Between the States. In an attempt to cut down the list of supernumerary officers, Congress made provision for dropping from the rolls those officers found by an examining board to be unfit for service by reason of intemperance or vicious habits.¹⁸ The work of the "Benzine Boards" markedly improved the efficiency of the corps. That commanders approved such action is attested by a petition presented Congress requesting that certain officers not be re-instated for the good of the service.¹⁹

The next act of Congress fell more heavily. The number of Infantry regiments was ordered cut back from 45 to 25 and the number of officers as well as enlisted men was to be reduced.²⁰ This consolidation was attempted immediately and the necessary officers were selected by date of rank, provided the senior officer was deemed qualified and was present

¹⁶ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873, 1:87.

¹⁷ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1870, 1:92.

¹⁸ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1868, 1:17.

¹⁹ Senate, Executive Document No. 52, 45 Cong., 2 Sess., 1878.

²⁰ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1869, 1:23.

for duty. But one purpose of the program, the elimination of excess officers, was almost nullified by the inelastic retirement law. Congress therefore passed the act of July 15, 1870, whereby the retirement list was increased and the President was allowed to reassign officers either to regimental duty or to the supernumerary list. Department commanders were asked to list inefficient officers and boards held hearings to determine those officers' qualifications. The officers on the supernumerary list were then honorably discharged on January 1, 1871, with one year's pay and allowances to complete the consolidation.²¹

Such determined action caused an upset in the mental equilibrium of the Army and many injustices were undoubtedly propagated.²² Officers became extremely conscious of every decision and the fear and respect for this modern inquisition was to influence officers' thinking and actions for many years. Still, the over-all effect was beneficial. Many unfit officers were eliminated and the service immediately strengthened. This new awareness was salutary also, since it now behooved an officer to be more certain in his decisions which tacitly encouraged thought and attention, if not study, to tactics and professional skill. Promotions were by no means easy after the shakeup. The retirement list, though increased, remained full; yet there was more of an opportunity for a young man to advance than had existed previously.

²¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1870, 1:vi.

²² W. A. Graham, The Story of the Little Big Horn, (Harrisburg, Penn., c. 1926), xiv.

The soldier, too, came in for his full share of scrutiny. The elimination of excess men while consolidating the regiments was not such a problem in this respect. The government had to fulfill its contract and retain the soldier until his enlistment expired, but this was comparatively simple since the men had been enlisted largely for three years and many enlistments were being completed that year.²³ Therefore the enlisted men were not plagued by uncertainty as were the officers. If anything, they were reassured since those that re-enlisted signed up for a period of five years rather than three.

For the soldier, the ax of economy in Washington fell in the form of a reduction in pay from \$16.00 to \$13.00 per month for the private soldier and corresponding decreases for all enlisted ranks. The effect was like an electric shock. Apparently every soldier remembered he had important business elsewhere and the desertion rate soared to new heights. Re-enlistments, on the other hand, fell to a new low.²⁴ The recruiting service was hard put to keep regiments anywhere near effective strength. Those men that did enlist did so only to gain some immediate necessity or transportation at government expense to the West and then deserted as soon as they could. The boom in railroad building and the never satisfied need for men in the mines provided a tremendous labor market and the Army seemed doomed to supply it. This

²³ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1869, 1:26.
²⁴ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1871, 1:73.

situation demanded immediate action and Congress, thoroughly aroused to the urgency of the matter, passed a new pay bill on May 15, 1872. The new provisions did not raise the pay scale, but offered a reward for faithful service. Each man was to receive a raise of one dollar per month for his third, fourth, and fifth year of service, thus giving him a three dollar increase over his base pay during his fifth year of service. This money was to be retained pay and would be given to the soldier upon his discharge from service and was to be forfeited if he should desert.²⁵ A somewhat similar provision made it possible for enlisted men to deposit whatever funds they desired with the paymaster. All accounts exceeding \$50.00 were to draw six per cent annual interest. Both deposit and interest were held until discharge and were subject to forfeiture by desertion.²⁶

The salutary effects were not immediate. In the first place, not many men would enjoy the raise in pay for at least another year. Meanwhile the high wages as a day laborer were close at hand. Few deserters were ever apprehended on the frontier.²⁷ A well-mounted man, accustomed to the saddle, could outdistance all pursuit with only a few hours head-start. Once they had found work, they were protected from searchers by their employers.

There was another element contributing to disaffection in the service. This was the inequality of sentences adjudged

²⁵ Statutes at Large, 17:160.

²⁶ Ibid., 161.

²⁷ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873, 1:88.

by different court-martial boards for identical offenses.²⁸ Petty breaches of discipline were punished severely in comparison to other more serious crimes wherein the sentence might be fixed by presidential order. Once this fact penetrated to the high command, steps were taken to rectify it and the discipline began to reassert itself in the service. The reorganization and its inherent problems seemed to be near a final solution. The Army was again finding an internal equilibrium and officers and men could face the new day with some security and assurance.

The Army was learning; slowly as armies do, but nevertheless it was discovering how to get along with itself in its new environment. It was learning how to cope with its enemies in the field too. Officers learned that there were more alternatives than either success or failure of a campaign. Too many expeditions wore out their horses and exhausted their men without making any contact with Indians either hostile or friendly.²⁹ Their tactics were improving also; they were learning how to foil the prince of horse thieves, the Plains Indian. Every detachment in the field had struck camp and was mounted and in ranks when the sun rose to meet the frequent attempts of the Indians to stampede their stock.³⁰ Cavalrymen had learned to avoid mounted contact with these aboriginal centaurs. Dismounted action

28 Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1872, 1:4.

29 G. A. Custer, op. cit., 34.

30 Raymond L. Welty, "The Daily Life of the Frontier Soldier," The Cavalry Journal, 36:587, 1927.

gave greater accuracy in firing, and only accurate fire would stop the mad rush of the red man. Infantrymen, too, were discovering the efficacy of their long-range rifles and their ability to withstand a mounted charge. Wagon trains with veteran infantry as flankers could continue to move while under attack. "Stop and fight" became the Infantry tactic. Press the Indian with fire and pursuit. Always seize the initiative and take offensive action and the red man could be dissuaded of his purpose and his formations could be scattered into ineffectual individuals.³¹

In 1871 not a white man was killed by Indians in the Department of the Platte.³² But in other Departments things were not so quiet. The red man quickly sensed the change of government policy with the coming of the Friends as Indian agents in 1869. The savages began a period of intimidation and horse stealing. One Kiowa chief formulated a plan to steal every cavalry horse at Fort Sill. Only the lack of discipline among his men made the plan fail. All in all, the Indian considered the Peace Policy a "howling success."³³ To the north, the irreconcilable Uncapapa Sioux attacked, with little success, the troops guarding the construction gangs of the Northern Pacific railway.³⁴ In 1873, the frontier was restless.

³¹ Miles, Serving the Republic, 163.

³² Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1871, 1:31.

³³ Nye, op. cit., 139-44.

³⁴ Hafen, op. cit., 365.

Nevertheless, General Pope, now the commander of the Department of the Missouri, persisted in attempting to prevent rather than to punish Indian depredations. His cavalry units had been kept in the field all summer moving about slowly and rather aimlessly in an attempt to intimidate wandering parties of Indians. By November tenth he had withdrawn all his troops from the field and prepared to settle down and enjoy the winter.³⁵

Pope's immediate superior, Sheridan, was not cut from the same cloth. He had been promoted to Lieutenant-General and given command of the Division of the Missouri in 1869.³⁶ With his characteristic vigour, he appeared briefly in the field. In a counter-move to Pope's passive defense, he set four columns in motion, each moving from a different base of operation. Each column converged on the hostiles simultaneously, striking at the Indian's horses and villages in order to wear the hostiles down. Killing Indians was to be a secondary objective.³⁷ Under the command of Colonel Nelson A. Miles the scheme was pushed vigorously and the end result was the final complete subjugation of the Southern Tribes.

To the north, Sheridan faced a different problem. The range of the numerous Sioux tribes was enormous and completely uncontrolled. Military posts were not situated to render the greatest advantage as supply bases for fast-moving columns.

³⁵ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1873, 1:43.

³⁶ Sheridan, op. cit., 460.

³⁷ Nye, op. cit., 272.

There were few settlers in the country. In anticipation of trouble, Sheridan determined to establish new posts in such positions as would be of the most strategic value. The 7th Cavalry, stationed at Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, was sent into the Black Hills on an exploring and scientific expedition. In the fall of 1874, Custer returned without sighting an Indian, with several good sites for posts, and bursting with news of gold.³⁸

The Gold Rush to Conquest, 1874 - 1876

Gold has a peculiar power over the mind of the American. There are laws governing the ownership of property which is known to have gold ore in it, but they are special laws, laws beyond those governing private property of a less valuable sort. By some peculiar rationalization, lands owned by Indians did not come under the protection of even those special laws. At least such lands had never before been protected by law. But things were different in the Black Hills.

Many miners found themselves under arrest by United States troops; their outfits were destroyed and they were summarily carted to the jail at Fort Laramie. General Terry issued specific orders to that effect in the Department of Dakota. General Crook accompanied his troops from the Department of the Platte and personally ejected a group of miners.³⁹ However, Crook could see beyond the Indian claims

³⁸ Sheridan, op. cit., 500-1.

³⁹ Hafen, op. cit., 367-9.

and, while he executed his orders, he mused over the many horses that had been stolen by Sioux Indians and had never been recovered for fear of perpetrating a general outbreak.⁴⁰ Everyone was restless now. Crook, conqueror and champion of the Apaches in New Mexico and Arizona, was ready to agree with his chief as to the need for decisive offensive action. When a small band of Cheyenne and Arapahoe blusteringly asked if the United States wanted war the reply was "yes" -- unless the red man would return to their reservations and cease their depredations.⁴¹

Even so, the Army was in favor of stamping out illegal traffic with the Indians in arms and liquor. After the valiant stand of the buffalo hunters at Adobe Wells, they requested aid from troops to protect their trading post and they were flatly refused such aid because their post was not licensed to trade with Indians.⁴² The situation was still in a state of confusion from the divided administration by the Army and the Indian Bureau, but the Army was beginning to champion the red man's cause against the encroachment of the white man. A peculiar affinity was being born between the rival warriors.

The general morale of the Army was beginning to improve. The Secretary of War, after a personal tour of the western posts, was satisfied that the reflections cast on the disci-

⁴⁰ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:69-70.

⁴¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:25.

⁴² Ibid., 30.

pline of this force were not true. To the contrary, discipline and efficiency were constantly improving.

Physical standards were certainly higher than since before the war. Only 20 per cent of the applicants for enlistment were being accepted. Within the service desertions were rapidly declining and re-enlistments were increasing every year.⁴³ The records of trials by general court-martial showed that most offenses were of a petty character. The largest number of convictions by courts-martial in 1876 were charges of absent without leave, followed by drunkenness, and then disorders. These have never been considered major crimes in the service.⁴⁴ The low pay of non-commissioned officers contributed to their inefficiency and increased the number of cases of insubordination according to some field commanders.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the \$22.00 per month received by a first-sergeant of a line company plus additional pay for longevity was deemed sufficient by higher authority. Some commanders urged more mental and physical amusement for soldiers. It was believed that men should have a feeling of being occupied in some agreeable and useful duty, and any sort of approved recreation would add to their mental ease and help the men to overcome the eternal boredom.⁴⁶

This consideration of ways and means to improve the life and the mental standards of the enlisted man typified the

⁴³ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1876, 1:72.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 107-8.

⁴⁵ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:34.

⁴⁶ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1876, 1:453.

change in attitude of the officers of the United States Army. The "Benzine Boards" were stimulating the zeal and professional interest of every officer. Very few of the officers appointed in 1866 remained on active duty 10 years later. Those on duty were constantly under the threat of suspension or dismissal from the service for any failure in performing their duties. Colonel J. J. Reynold's partial victory over Crazy Horse in the early spring of 1876 is a case in point. Despite the destruction of the Indian village and all its accumulation of food and ammunition, he was found guilty by a court-martial and suspended from rank and command for one year on the specification of not fully exploiting his advantage.⁴⁷ All officers became sensitive to any charges against them, even those in the public press, and it became the custom for an officer to demand a public inquiry to clear his record for future reference.⁴⁸ All this made the Army appear ridiculous at times, but it served to make officers consider every action beforehand and thus contributed to the proficiency of the service.

The efficiency gained by standardization of armament had been accomplished by 1875. All small-arms used by the Army were now constructed on the Springfield breech-loading pattern and were caliber .45. The controversy over the excellence of this weapon has led to the belief that it was not a good

⁴⁷ Schmitt, op. cit., footnote on 192.

⁴⁸ House of Representatives, Executive Document No. 142,
44 Cong., 1 Sess., 1876.

design for military service.⁴⁹ Lt. Godfrey, a survivor of the Little Big Horn battle, said, "Our carbines clogged and would not work well, on account of dirt and dust on the ammunition and in the carbines."⁵⁰ Such a statement might indicate a habit of putting a protective coat of grease in the chamber and barrel of the weapon, in which case the extractor could be expected not to function if the weapon had been carried a few hours after cleaning. Mrs. Custer referred to the short range of the cavalry carbine and its inaccuracy.⁵¹ On the other hand, Sergeant Windolph, "H" Company, 7th Cavalry, said that the effective range of the weapon was 600 yards.⁵² This range is all that is expected from the rifle carried by today's infantryman, while the carbine used has an extreme accurate range of only 300 yards. In view of these facts, one must conclude that the Army simply did not realize the capabilities of this weapon and that the inadequate training in marksmanship and incorrect methods of care and preservation of breech-loading firearms were the limiting factors and not the weapon. In this respect, then, the Army in 1876 was not realizing the full potential of its equipment.

Congress unwittingly aided this adverse situation in 1874 when it appropriated sufficient funds to produce only

⁴⁹ Oliver Lyman Spaulding, The United States Army in War and Peace, (New York, 1937), 354.

⁵⁰ I. M. Thrall, "The Sioux War," Collections of the Kansas State Historical Society, 1:575.

⁵¹ E. B. Custer, Guldon, 33.

⁵² Hunt, op. cit., 92.

ten rounds of metallic ammunition per soldier for the entire year.⁵³ Obviously little of this ammunition could be used for training or experimental purposes. The Quartermaster's Department, too, felt the pinch for it was necessary to cut off some allowances to which the troops were entitled to keep expenditures within its appropriation. The worst blow, however, fell on the over-worked soldier of the Plains, because the strength of the Army was limited to 25,000 men, a cut back of 5,000.⁵⁴ But during most of these years, the men were well supplied with clothing and equipment. The new uniforms were issued to all troops, and were proving more satisfactory than the old type. The best improvements were the new, broad-brimmed, felt campaign hat and the cartridge belt which replaced the worthless kepi-style forage cap and the clumsy cartridge box.⁵⁵ Stronger, lighter, and better-fitted boots were also issued to all troopers. Some improvement was made in winter uniforms, such as the high-top overshoe, but in this respect men employed in a winter campaign were still given their choice as to what was the best clothing.⁵⁶

Despite these difficulties, the service was slowly reaching a higher state of perfection for dealing with its

⁵³ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:xviii.

⁵⁴ Ibid., iv.

⁵⁵ John F. Finerty, War-Path and Bivouac, (Chicago, c. 1890), 52.

⁵⁶ Bourke, op. cit., 252; Miles, Recollections, 219.

task. The realization of the importance of the individual soldier led to the practice of training men more thoroughly while they were in recruiting depots.⁵⁷ Commanding officers were taking advantage of every opportunity to train men even while on campaign. Troops were moved every day to teach them to prepare to move out quickly and efficiently and to improve their horsemanship.

There were more professional soldiers by this time and units had the efficient appearance and demonstrated an ease in performing military evolutions that bespoke veteran soldiery.⁵⁸ General officers could refer to various units with complete faith in their ability to execute military strategy and battlefield tactics with promptness and understanding.

The 4th Cavalry was as clean-cut an outfit as one could find.⁵⁹ Its Colonel Mackenzie was as tough as rawhide and his punishment of misdemeanors was quick and harsh. At the same time he wrangled promotions for his officers⁶⁰ and provided adequate uniform equipment for his men. Mackenzie made the Fourth and it would follow him to the end of the earth.

The 5th Cavalry, too, was a veteran unit by 1876. Every officer had been under Indian fire⁶¹ and the majority

⁵⁷ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:3.

⁵⁸ Bourke, op. cit., 257.

⁵⁹ John J. Bourke, "Mackenzie's Last Fight with the Cheyennes," Journal of the Military Service Institution, 53:346, November - December, 1913.

⁶⁰ Parker, op. cit., 47. Some officers reached a captaincy after only twelve years service!

⁶¹ King, op. cit., 7.

of its troopers were serving on their second or third enlistment. Like the others, the Seventh possessed the hard core of confidence in their capabilities that comes only to veterans. Colonel Custer's good judgment of horses made it the best mounted regiment in the service.⁶² Much has been said of the recruits in the outfit in 1876, but Sergeant Windolph discounts that excuse by saying that about half of the 150 new men were veterans of the War Between the States or had served a previous hitch in the service.⁶³ Another prominent participant of the Yellowstone Campaign of 1876 was the 5th Infantry. Its colonel, Nelson A. Miles, was the youngest colonel in the service.⁶⁴ Under Miles, the Fifth had fought the decisive campaign against the Southern Tribes in 1874. It was Miles who had established the first military gymnasium and the 5th Infantry had been conditioned by the earliest field-training exercises. Marksmanship had been drilled into them too.⁶⁵ This regiment was trained to a fine edge as athletes and as soldiers. In addition to this, the Fifth boasted the best record for discipline of any regiment in the service. These and the other units that marched on the Sioux Nation in 1876 were all competent veterans.

General officers, too, knew their jobs. Sheridan fore-saw the uprising and did everything possible to eliminate the supply problem beforehand by establishing huge depots

62 Brininstool, op. cit., 23.

63 Hunt, op. cit., 50.

64 Sheridan, op. cit., 499.

65 Miles, Serving the Republic, 143.

of rations, ammunition, and forage on the Yellowstone River a year in advance. He planned his strategy on the same concentric movements that had succeeded on the Southern Plains.⁶⁶ Field commanders, such as George Crook, were available to carry out the Division Commander's strategy and to insure its success. Crook, more than any other field commander, realized the paradoxical problem of supply that faced any armed force in this region, that is, the need for speed and the necessity for large amounts of bulky material. When his column moved in the spring, it was accompanied by a wagon train of 86 wagons and a pack train of five divisions of 80 mules each.⁶⁷ Even this was not considered a redundancy. Officers were ordered to mess with the men to save space on the wagons.

There were other evidences of knowledge about Indian fighting in this campaign. The cavalry units boxed up their sabers as useless weapons and left them in garrison.⁶⁸ The Infantry left swords, bayonets, knapsacks, and cartridge boxes behind. They were stripped to the essentials for a fighting man -- strong clothing, good food, and plenty of ammunition.⁶⁹

Tactical leaders were convinced by now of the inefficacy of desultory scouting. All minds were guided by the necessity for fresh troops and strong horses to follow the

⁶⁶ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:29.

⁶⁷ Bourke, op. cit., 254.

⁶⁸ Brininstool, op. cit., 25.

⁶⁹ Miles, Serving the Republic, 141.

hostiles relentlessly to a final conclusion or to the last ounce of the pursuers' strength.⁷⁰

The campaign was opened, strangely enough, in Chicago. By means of the telegraph, General Sheridan directed the first movement to begin. General Terry's column, which included Custer's 7th Cavalry, advanced from Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, on the east. Colonel John Gibson^b, acting under Terry's orders, moved from Fort Ellis, Montana. General Crook advanced from Fort Fetterman, Wyoming. The Department Commanders, Generals Crook and Terry, were to move independently of each other and were to ignore department boundaries in the effort to actively and passively exert constant pressure on all wandering bands of Indians.

The entire campaign was marked by the activity and accuracy of Army intelligence. The famous battle where Buffalo Bill killed Chief Yellow Hand in a duel and the 5th Cavalry drove the Indian reinforcements back to their agency was ordered by Sheridan in Chicago.⁷¹ Only once was Sheridan's ability not appreciated. Crook, in reply to Sheridan's order to hit them again, laconically remarked, "It is rather difficult to surround three Indians with one soldier."⁷² For on that important point, due to the positive statements of Indian Bureau Agents about the small numbers of warriors who had left the agencies to join the

⁷⁰ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1875, 1:84.

⁷¹ King, op. cit., 17.

⁷² Finerty, op. cit., 181.

hostiles, the Army intelligence made a fatal misjudgment.⁷³ No Army man expected to find more than 500 warriors in the field. In March, Crook, the first to realize the error, met a force equal to his own at the Rosebud, a thousand warriors.⁷⁴ By the end of July the 7th Cavalry would meet a force estimated by Reno and Benteen at 2,500 fighting men.⁷⁵ Never had the Indians been in such large numbers; never had they fought with such discipline; never had they been led with such skill.

The converging columns of blue-coated troopers began to develop the situation immediately after taking the field. Both field commanders made contact with Indians or with trails of Indian villages. General Terry sent the Seventh out on an independent scout to make contact and to fix what was believed to be the main body of hostiles. The ensuing action was the legendary Custer Massacre. Now Terry as well as Crook realized the full strength of the hostiles. Cautiously the column took up its movement from the Little Big Horn and moved toward its unexpected junction with Crook.

The two independent commands had executed a perfect pincers movement without being aware of their luck, and the wily Sioux slipped away from the converging columns, bag and baggage, with neither commander aware of their movement.

⁷³ Sheridan, op. cit., 505.

⁷⁴ Vestal, op. cit., 221.

⁷⁵ Senate, Executive Document No. 81, 44 Cong., 1 Sess., 1876.

Plainly disgusted, Crook grimly stripped his troopers to the barest essentials and with fifteen days rations set out on the longest, hardest march ever executed by a military force in the Indian Wars.⁷⁶

The immediate result seemed inconclusive. Blundering and mismanagement of well laid plans with nothing accomplished seemed to be the recapitulation of the officers of Terry's column. Staff officers were loud in their blame of others and hurriedly washed their hands of the whole summer's operation and the dust of the Yellowstone Valley. Sheridan's headquarters had nothing to say, but avoided the subject like a plague. Those few remaining at Terry's headquarters were apologetic. The consensus among the line officers, however, was blunt and to the point.

The rash and unauthorized conduct of Custer resulting so fatally, entirely deranged Terry's plans, but, more than that, demoralized his command when the reenforcements arrived. They found the troops which had been in the field very much demoralized, in fact they were afraid of the Indians.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Robert G. Athearn, "A Winter Campaign Against the Sioux," The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, 35:280, September, 1948, footnote. "For a whole month neither officers nor men had any change of clothing . . . and no food except bacon, hard bread and coffee. They had no table furniture, but ate with their fingers or pocket knives. During a great part of this time it rained, and night after night they laid down to sleep . . . on the wet ground, none of them with anything but one blanket and many of them without any. The clothing wore out and at least one tenth of them came in either without pantaloons or coats and some without either, marching in shirts and drawers, they having used the remnants of their outer clothing to tie around their feet. Many of them marched with bleeding feet for they had to either march or die."

⁷⁷ Ibid., 279-80.

The gloom of the winter that settled over the region fitted the temper of the soldiers who were forced by duty to remain. Chagrined but stubborn, Mackenzie equipped the 4th Cavalry to face the bitter winter and moved out to make contact with the Northern Cheyennes. In one decisive battle he broke their power and drove them out into the snowy wastes of the mountains.⁷⁸ Miles obstinately prepared for a campaign to continue all winter in the belief that the Indians must have no rest, and he drove the 5th Infantry through one march after another all winter long.⁷⁹

The events of the next spring vindicated all those concerned, however. The exhausted hostiles either reported to the reservation or fled north into Canada. The wars of the Northern Plains were over. There was no intention of offering the red man a treaty this time. The Regulars of the United States Army came as conquerors.⁸⁰

78 Bourke, "Mackenzie's Last Fight with the Cheyennes," op. cit.

79 Athearn, op. cit., 281.

80 Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1877, 1:85.

CHAPTER VIII

EPILOGUE

Some of the cavalry regiments have, during the spring and summer, traveled in pursuit of Indians, and for the purpose of protecting exposed settlements, a distance of over four thousand miles, and the hard work and wear and tear upon both men and animals in those frontier campaigns can be fully appreciated only by those who are familiar with the country operated in, and who know its character, the long distances to be overcome, and the great difficulty of furnishing supplies. This condition of affairs is not only true for the past year, but it has been nearly the same thing for the past ten years, and I think I can safely say that for this length of time no men have ever worked harder or shown a higher sense of duty than the little army which has defended our rapidly-extending western settlements.¹ Lieutenant-General Philip Henry Sheridan, Commanding the Military Division of the Missouri,

The bitter snow of the winter of 1876 melted slowly down the red-clay flanks of the Bitterroot Mountains and the hopes of the American Indian ran with it. Awaiting the warriors of Crazy Horse at the hated reservations were the only white men they could understand, the soldiers of the United States Army. The "pony soldiers" and the "walk-a-heaps," tough veterans of an undeclared war, took the guns and the horses from the finest light cavalry in the world. And they immediately became helpless, vermin-ridden relics of the stone age sitting moodily in canvas tepees watching trains roar past them. They knew the trains were scattering thousands of hated farmers over the broad acres that they, the Dakotah peoples, had conquered only a comparatively short time ago. Those same

¹ Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1878, 1:6.

acres would turn to dust in two generations under the pulverizing plowshare.

The red man would adopt one more weapon from the white man before he would submit to the white man's yoke completely. Religious faith would become a weapon of revenge. The ghost dances would try to call back the buffalo from the bowels of the earth. The messiah would tear the earth away from the conquerors. Like the early Christians, the ancestors of the conqueror, the red man would wait until bitter disappointment would convince him of the falseness of his dream.

The soldier who took the Indian's gun stood on the threshold of a new era, too. For ten long years he and his comrades had stood to arms in a continuous state of war. The Regular Army had begun as a loosely-held mob of citizen soldiers led by men who were unconvinced of the reality of the War on the Plains. The soldier felt no loyalty to the service. There were no regimental traditions, no standing jokes in the regiment, no officers who had become legendary in the service. This lack of cohesion aggravated the lack of proper equipment, the poor weapons, and little basic training. Opposing this inefficiency in leadership and material were the high wages offered by the railroad builders and the mine owners. The very prairies and mountains developed a malevolent personality. They combined to isolate the soldier from his home, to scour him with violent weather, to stretch before him to infinity, to bore him, and to frighten him. They presented a problem in logistics and supply that

the mule and wagon never completely solved. The most popular antidote to these things became desertion. The Army would cynically remark that their real purpose was to populate the West.

The whole situation was unique in military annals, as is every new problem of war. After a slow start and some bad defeats, the Army began to realize the full scope of its problem. General Sheridan overturned the time honored strategy of the Plains with his successful winter campaign. Then, slowly, the service developed and provided the necessary equipment. Breech-loaders came to the soldier, rations improved in quality, new uniforms adapted to the Plains were devised. An economy-minded Congress unwittingly rejuvenated the officer corps and devised a system of pay for enlisted men that encouraged honorable service. The enemy, too, contributed his bit, for a military truism is, "men never develop a true esprit de corps until they have been in battle together." And the red man provided all the battle necessary to weld the Army into a fighting machine.

Courageous leaders with real fighting men at their command experimented boldly in strategy. Company commanders devised tactics that by their very stubbornness and tenacity kept their fast-moving opponents off balance. By the end of the decade everyone had become aware of the importance of the individual soldier, and that awareness would still be evident in World War II.

There were still major faults in the system. Mobility and bulk were necessary attributes to a transport system in this enormous area and mule trains could not meet the demand. Professional pride was successfully substituted for worn out equipment and horse meat was eaten in the place of rations. The sense of isolation and the feeling of boredom were always problems for the troops of the West. The mental conversion to breech-loading weapons came too late to save the colorful Custer. Sacrifice and stubbornness overcame these shortcomings too.

The trooper that accepted the weapon of his opponent at the Spotted Tail and Red Cloud Indian agencies had been tempered in the crucible of experience. He stood on the threshold of fifteen more years of this irregular warfare, a wise, proud, well-equipped veteran. He was a hard-drinking, hard-swearing professional soldier, perhaps the only specimen of that breed ever produced by the United States. General Sherman said he was the hardest working soldier in the world.² General Wolseley, chief of the British Army, said he was, man for man, the best soldier in the world.³

² Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1874, 1:5.
³ Downey, op. cit., 309.

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